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PRINCE PRIMROSE THE FLOWER OF THE FLOCK



OR,
**THE GRAND COUP AT
PARADISE GULCH.**

A ROMANCE OF SILVERLAND.

BY LIEUTENANT A. K. SIMS,
AUTHOR OF "HUCKLEBERRY, THE FOOT-HILLS
DETECTIVE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A WILD RIDE.

"SHE'S a hummin' bird, pardner, as fur as feathers goes; but, she's got the grit of an eagle!"

The speaker nodded admiringly toward a young woman who was fearlessly approaching a plunging, coal-black stallion that a half-dozen cowboys were vainly endeavoring to restrain.

It had been a day of hard work and excitement on the Nettleton Ranch. A bunch of half-wild horses had been driven in from the outlying ranges. They were high-spirited, mettlesome creatures, wholly unused to the presence of man, and the task of breaking and subduing them furnished quite as much perilous incident

WITH A PRAYER ON HIS LIPS, PRINCE PRIMROSE PREPARED TO HURL THE WHISTLING NOOSE.

and adventure as the most reckless cowboy could desire.

Edith Nettleton, the young and winsome daughter of Jacob Nettleton, the ranch king, had singled out the coal-black stallion and asked to be permitted to attempt his subjection.

The stallion was a superb animal, finely proportioned and full of life. His glossy coat flashed back the sunlight, his eyes gleamed with fire and the play of his shapely muscles could be plainly seen beneath the satin skin.

But the gleaming, dark eyes, the expanded nostrils and the pointed, twitching ears were eloquent with warning. The beautiful stallion was an animal to be avoided! And now, as he reared and plunged, striking viciously with fore and hind feet, and uttering human-like screams of rage and terror, it seemed but foolish recklessness for any one to approach him.

Edith Nettleton was a young woman accustomed to having her own way in all things. As a wild rider, not a cowboy there could surpass her. From infancy she had been trained to horseback exercise, and prided herself on being a practiced and graceful equestrienne.

Her wish was law—she was virtually the ranch manager; and when she requested that the black stallion be reserved for the exercise of her skill, not a word of protest was uttered, whatever the cowboys may have thought.

Two years before, Jacob Nettleton had been seriously injured by a fall from a horse. He had struck on his head and shoulders, and the shock deprived him for a time of consciousness and came near depriving him of life. His recovery was slow and tedious, and when he came back from the confines of the grave it was with a weak and shattered intellect.

From that moment Edith had taken upon her slender shoulders the burden of her father's business affairs;—and a courteous and capable manager she proved to be.

In all her efforts she was ably seconded by the ranch foreman, Kenneth Primrose. Primrose was a large-boned, ungainly fellow, but with a heart that was tender and true. Underneath the rough, cowboy exterior there lay the pure gold of the cultured gentleman, the chivalrous knight and the courageous hero. Not a man on the ranch but was his personal friend; and his Christian name was almost forgotten in the title which they had conferred on him:—PRINCE PRIMROSE.

Primrose feared for Edith in her proposed attempt, but he knew her too well to give expression to his feelings. Once he was on the point of appealing to Mr. Nettleton. A glance at that gentleman showed him how useless such an appeal would be. Nettleton was standing just within the corral gate, his restless eyes roving in an uncertain, but pleased way, over the scene before him. He was clapping his hands and urging Edith to the effort, with boisterous enthusiasm.

Nettleton's faith in his daughter's capabilities was boundless. If she had announced a determination to visit the pendant moon he would have believed the matter quite within the range of possibilities. Nothing that she did or attempted was wrong, reckless or preposterous.

There was something indescribably pathetic in Nettleton's appearance. His attire was neat and becoming, his figure tall and spare, and his snowy, white hair floated out from beneath his wide sombrero like a frosted mane. In his younger days he had been one of the handsomest and stateliest of the men of the border, and something of the old-time spirit and dignity still hovered about him. But, after all, he was only the shadow of the once great ranch king; and Primrose was deeply touched as he contrasted what Nettleton had been with what he now was.

Seeing that Edith was fully determined to mount the plunging stallion, Primrose advanced and offered to assist her.

"Thank you!" she said, with a smile that went straight to his heart. "I have called the horse Ebon, but I'm inclined to think Thunder or Storm-cloud would be more appropriate. He's a beauty, isn't he? It's about all the men can do to hold him!"

"He is beautiful, but he shows a vicious spirit, Miss Nettleton! My advice, if I was allowed to give any, would be that you delegate his breaking to one of the cowboys."

The well-meant warning was greeted with a silvery laugh.

"And confess that I'm unequal to the task? No; I'm not afraid. And I want the honor of subduing him. He will make a magnificent saddle-horse; and if I conquer him at the start, he will never forget it!"

She gathered her short skirts and ran quickly forward. Primrose extended his hand, from which she vaulted lightly to the saddle. As soon as she had secured a firm seat and had a good grip of the rein, the cowboys released the wild steed.

For a moment the beautiful black stood quivering and almost motionless. Then he bounded straight away, like an arrow released from the bow. Edith drew heavily on the rein, and he darted through the gateway, almost brushing Jacob Nettleton from his feet in the impetuous rush.

Then the black stopped, with a suddenness that would have sent a less accomplished rider flying over his head. Following this came a series of wild pitches, in which every artifice was brought into play to unseat the rider. The stallion reared and plunged and kicked. At one moment he would rise almost perpendicularly on his hind feet; then pitch forward until his heels would twinkle at the sky. This failing, he began a succession of bounds and leaps. He would spring straight up into the air, and come down stiff-legged and with a shock that jarred the earth. Occasionally this was varied by a twist that whirled him around and brought his hind feet down in the place where his forefeet had been.

It was a terrible struggle. But, through it all, the daring girl kept her seat with a firmness that brought cheer after cheer from the assembled and excited cowboys.

The excitement and exertion sent the blood in warm surges to her face. Her eyes sparkled like gems, and her entire being was thrilled with the feeling that comes from confidence and victory. Her hair escaped from its coil, and floated over her shoulders, a nut-brown glory of silken floss. The bright ribbons at her throat fluttered and whipped; and her appearance and manner fully justified the assertion of the cowboy that she was a humming bird with the spirit of an eagle.

As for Jacob Nettleton, his delight passed all bounds. He roared and whooped until he was out of breath, and then swung his big sombrero with all the exuberance and joy of childhood.

Suddenly his shouting changed to a cry of alarm.

Prince Primrose had ordered a number of mounted cowboys to station themselves conveniently near, with *riatas* ready, in case of accident. He had also mounted his own cowpony; and, with rope coiled, watched the contest between the girl and the horse, with a kindly, yet anxious eye.

The occasion he had feared came at last. The stallion succeeded in partially unseating his fair rider; and then, with a scream of rage, darted away toward the open plains!

Instantly, with rope whirling, Primrose was in pursuit—the mounted cowboys thundering at his heels.

For a little while it seemed that Edith must lose her position and her control of the brute, and be dragged to death.

She dropped the bridle-rein, and clung with desperate energy to the stallion's mane, as she strove to draw herself back into the saddle. Her face was deathly white, and had in it an appealing look that caused Primrose to set his teeth hard and dig the heavy rowels mercilessly into the flanks of his swift, lithe pony.

By almost superhuman exertions she finally succeeded in regaining her place in the saddle. Her position was improved, but she had lost all control of her steed. The bridle-reins had slipped forward over the animal's ears and were now beyond her reach, and the now frightened as well as maddened black stretched his neck straight out and thundered along like a tornado.

Primrose's pony hung at the stallion's heels with admirable pluck and pertinacity.

"Just cling to the saddle, Miss Nettleton! Don't attempt anything else! I will rope him, if nothing else offers!"

The words held more of hope than he had in his heart. He realized the danger that must follow should he stop the black with the *riata*. The stallion would be hurled to the earth with such force that the young lady's life would be imperiled.

He had scarcely shouted the words before he regretted their utterance, for he felt she was equally aware of the risk that must attend such an effort.

He coiled the rope at the saddle-bow, resolved that he would not attempt so hazardous a thing while a spark of hope remained. Yet, he had but another mile in which to rescue the girl! At the end of that mile a canyon interposed. The black was headed straight for it, and if he was not halted before reaching it, horse and rider would be hurled to death.

More than once Primrose had nervously fingered his revolver, half-resolved to stop the stallion's headlong career with a pistol-ball. To this were interposed the same objections that prevented the use of the *riata*.

Again he bent forward in the deep saddle and urged the willing pony on with voice and quirt and spur. It had so far held its own. Now, he was determined to overtake the black, or kill the pony in the attempt.

The little brute was very fleet of foot, and under his goadings strained every muscle. What a mad race that was! Slowly, inch by inch, the pony gained on the black. A half mile slipped beneath their feet in an incredibly short space of time. Now the pony's nose lapped the flanks of the stallion! On, on, with flying feet, with laboring breath and straining muscles!

The faithful and intelligent pony could do no more. It could not draw nearer. Its strength was waning, or the stallion had increased his speed.

And nearer and yet nearer drew the deadly

canyon, with its precipitous walls and its jagged, fang-like rocks.

Primrose's breath came quick and hard; his face whitened and his blue eyes took on a steely hue.

As for Edith Nettleton, she was courageously attempting to obey him, and nerving herself for the shock of the horse's fall. She realized her peril. If she could only have reached that dangling bridle-rein she would have felt safe. But she could not; and she knew that all hope of rescue lay with Primrose and the speed of his pony. The cowboys were plunging along in their rear, at varying distances, but none were near enough to render assistance.

Seeing that the pony was likely to drop behind, Primrose again fingered his revolver, as if uncertain what to do. Then he grasped the *riata* and swung it in circling folds, ready for a cast.

They were now almost on the brink of the canyon. A half-dozen bounds would hurl the stallion and his helpless rider into space. It was a desperate alternative. With a prayer on his lips Prince Primrose prepared to hurl the whistling noose.

The black, at this juncture, saw the yawning chasm, and with a startled snort threw himself upon his haunches. It was an opportunity not to be neglected. The rope swept through the air, and the noose dropped over his graceful head and tightened around his arching neck. The trained pony braced itself for the shock; and the black was hurled upon his side, where he lay, kicking and struggling on the very verge of the mighty rift.

Primrose leaped down and ran to Edith's assistance. But, she had deftly avoided entanglement, and now arose, flushed, but smiling. By a dexterous bound, she had escaped the crushing force of the fall, and, although considerably shaken up, was not in the least injured.

"A narrow escape!" observed Primrose, turning to the struggling stallion, when she saw that she was unhurt. "Another leap, and a cast of the rope would have been useless."

"How can I ever thank you?" she cried, coming to his assistance and taking firm hold of the bridle-rein.

A strange light came into Primrose's eyes. But, the black struggled to his feet, at this instant, and prevented an answer. A moment later, the cowboys swooped down. Primrose closed his teeth with a click, although his breast heaved and a painful flush crept to the roots of his wavy hair.

"You will not care to try this animal again, I suppose!" as he clung to the bit and held the surging stallion.

"Indeed I shall!" Edith exclaimed, forgetful of her recent peril. Her eyes were sparkling in a way that made her radiantly beautiful. "He is almost exhausted now, and I know I can manage him. If I give up at this point, I can never do anything with him."

Primrose protested earnestly.

"If you will not assist me to mount, I know that one of the cowboys will. I never was unseated before to-day; and he cannot do it again. It was an accident."

"And one that came near proving fatal!"

"Don't!" she pouted. "I thank you ever so much for what you did, but I can't endure preaching. Help me into the saddle!"

Protestations were useless with this spoiled creature. Primrose extended his hand and assisted her to remount.

The stallion recommenced his plunging, but he was pretty well blown, and his pitching had lost much of its vim. Edith clung to him with rare courage and spirit, and when the corral was again reached, the noble black was fairly subdued.

Through it all Primrose's eyes followed her with a hungry gaze.

"She is a woman to be proud of!" he muttered. "A woman to be proud of! But, what am I, to be thinking of her? Bah! My brain is becoming filled with foolish fancies!"

CHAPTER II.

A FANDANGO.

THE strains of a violin came from the brightly-illuminated ranch building. Occasionally the notes were drowned in a burst of laughter, a Babel of words or a snatch of song. Then they would rise again; and the sinuous, liquid tones of "Money Musk" or "The Arkansas Traveler" would float out on the soft night air.

A genuine New Mexican fandango was in progress at the Nettleton Ranch, and a company that was truly motley and cosmopolitan was gathered there. It was composed principally of cowboys from the neighboring ranches, but they hailed originally from almost every State in the Union. In addition, there were Mexicans, Indians from the interior, and miners from the mountains; also a few citizens from the adjacent towns.

The fair sex was represented, though not in so liberal a manner. A half-dozen dark-eyed señoritas graced the occasion; and Edith Nettleton and Dollie Dimple, her maid and general servant, lent their presence.

The fandango celebrated the close of the great round-up. For weeks the cowboys of that portion of the Territory had been scouring the *mesas* and the mountains and collecting the cat-

tle on the various ranges. All had been brought in or accounted for. The season past had dealt kindly with the vast herds, and the profits to the ranchmen promised to be more than liberal. This was especially true of the Nettleton Ranch, and Edith had announced a fandango in consequence.

There was no need to herald the event in newspapers. The word flew in that mysterious way in which news travels in the wild West. It went from cowboy to cowboy, over hundreds of miles, and within less than a week was on every lip. And such an outpouring as resulted! Silverland had seldom witnessed its like.

"The affair promises to be a decided success!" Edith observed, as she stood at the entrance, with Primrose, receiving the rapidly-arriving guests.

There was a happy light in her eyes that showed how much it pleased her to give joy to others.

"Trust the cowboys to make a success of a fandango!" replied Primrose, bowing right and left as he greeted the new-comers. "I never knew them to fail."

"Ah, colonel! Glad to see you! was afraid you might not come!" as a short, portly man made his appearance. A shake of the hand followed; then the crowd swept the portly gentleman on into the rooms.

"Colonel Midas, of Paradise Gulch!" explained Primrose. "I was getting my manners in shape to present him to you, when he disappeared. They say he's dreadfully rich."

"And, therefore, he deserved to be presented? I see you are very like other people, Mr. Primrose!"

"It's the way of the world!" he exclaimed, laughing. "I would have it otherwise if I could, but I can't. It is not an agreeable arrangement, I assure you, for as I have no money it always cuts me out."

The pressure grew less at the entrance, as the minutes slipped by. The rooms were filled to overflowing. In such affairs early hours are kept on the ranges. The dancing begins early, although it usually ends very late.

The violin was now capering wildly and fantastically; and the loud cries of the "caller" came plainly to their ears.

"We might as well see the fun while it is in progress!" observed Primrose. "It is not likely that any others will come. If they should they can make their presence known."

Edith was equally anxious to mingle with her guests and enjoy the occasion to its full. A fandango, such as this, was not an every-day occurrence, and the semi-isolated existence she led on the ranch made her grateful for the presence of even this mixed company.

The large room used for the fandango was a whirling sea, when they went in. The dancing was at its height and the cowboys entered into the spirit of it in a manner that almost threatened the heavy flooring.

On a high perch, at the opposite end, sat the orchestra of one, sawing at his battered violin as if for dear life. Such old-fashioned, heel-tickling melodies as he drew from it are not often heard in these degenerate days.

Edith was at once the center of attraction. A group of gorgeously-dressed men fluttered about her, each anxious to engage her hand for as many waltzes, cotillions and quadrilles as he could. It was impossible to favor all, and she gave her promises sparingly and judiciously.

Her father, from his post of honor, watched her with a delight that could scarcely bear repression. But Primrose turned away, with a pained heart. He could not push himself forward and crave her recognition, as the others did. He felt somehow that, standing as he did in an inferior position, she ought to make the advance, if any was made. He told himself that he was more of a gentleman and in every way a better man than those semi-barbarians on whom she was smiling, even though they were clothed in peacock-colored raiment and sported silken sashes half a yard wide.

So, he turned from her; and she, all unaware of the hungry craving in his heart, smiled and jested with the men gathered about her.

She respected and honored Primrose; but she did not love him—and her love was what he desired above all else. She did not love any one of the opposite sex, except her father. Him she idolized, tyrannized over and pitied. A handsome face, a flattering tongue and a dashing manner frequently brought a tell-tale blush to her cheek and set her heart to tripping in an unwonted way. But that was all. The influence had never been lasting. She rather prided herself on the fact that she was heart-whole and fancy-free.

It was not long until Colonel Midas, the bonanza king of Paradise Gulch, maneuvered for and obtained an introduction. He was a red-faced, pompous man, with an inflated idea of his own importance, which revealed itself in every word and action.

"Ah, Miss Nettleton!" he murmured, bowing low over her extended hand, "this is a great honor! A great honor! For a long time I have thought that the better classes of the Territory ought to know more of each other. Allow me, please, to request your hand for the next dance!"

As it chanced the next thing on the dainty programme, which Edith had had printed for the occasion, was a waltz. It occurred to her that they would not make a pretty figure as waltzers. Midas was short and stout, with an imperceptible neck and a protuberant stomach. She was tall and sylph-like. His tread was an elephantine waddle; while she moved about so easily and airily that her feet seemed scarcely to touch the floor. Nevertheless, she consented. He was her guest and her father's and he was influential and rich.

The perspiring violinist struck into a waltz, and they whirled away across the room. Chancing to look around, she saw that Prince Primrose was also among the waltzers. She had wondered vaguely, once or twice, as the gorgeous gallants pressed about her, why Primrose was not among them, asking preference at her hand. The conclusion she reached was that he did not care for dancing.

He had chosen a handsome, black-eyed senorita, with raven hair, cherry-red lips, and the figure of a Hebe. Her waltzing was the personification of sensuous grace.

An uncomfortable feeling came to Edith as she saw them; a feeling she could not wholly analyze. Had Primrose felt himself slighted? She recalled, in a faint way, the pained look that had been on his face, and wondered if that had caused it. At the time she had attributed it to his natural aversion for dandified men.

The black-eyed Mexican girl was chatting volubly, and Primrose was listening with an attention that was more flattering than words. Occasionally he replied, in a witty way perhaps, for the girl's silvery laughter could be plainly heard.

"It's a pity we cannot select our society, as they do in the East!" whispered Colonel Midas, edging away from a pair of bouncing and jovial cowboys. "Perhaps we can, when the country is a little older and more developed."

Edith stared her surprise.

"Why, colonel, all that are here are here at my invitation."

"In a general way only," urged Midas, extricating his heavy feet from her short train, which he had clumsily trodden on. "You sent out an invitation that included all who chose to accept it."

"And all are welcome, colonel. I hope the time will never come when any well-disposed person will have cause to think his presence not desirable."

Midas coughed back his disgust, and in doing so again trod on her train.

"Excuse my awkwardness!" he begged, staring hard at Primrose, who was now whirling past with his partner. He regarded Primrose, with whom he was slightly acquainted, as no better than a common cowboy, and the flush that came to Edith's face as Primrose approached, nettled him.

The panting colonel was doomed to even worse mishaps. As he floundered about in his efforts to extricate himself from the folds of drapery, his foot caught, and he was precipitated almost headlong to the floor. The fall threw him in front of Primrose and the Mexican senorita, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that they kept themselves from being dragged from their feet.

Midas arose, choking and red with rage. The smile that Edith could not repress did not add to his comfort.

"You—you scoundrel!" he roared, shaking his fist at Primrose. "You did that purposely. You threw me down!"

Primrose's face flushed hotly.

"You are mistaken, colonel!" he replied, curbing his temper with an effort. "You threw yourself."

He whirled on, without further explanation or statement, leaving Midas to work off his spleen in some other way.

"Such an awkward fellow!" chirped the senorita, sweetly. "Why Miss Nettleton waltzes with him I cannot understand."

"He's rich!" exclaimed Primrose, with a hard laugh. "One doesn't need grace or beauty, if he has wealth. Money discounts brains and everything else in this country."

The senorita sighed her surprise and regret and then drifted into the stream of conversational nothings with which she had been entertaining him.

A royal feast was spread at midnight, and the tired and hungry dancers did it ample justice. There is never a time when the average cowboy has not a wholesome appetite. At this feast Mr. Nettleton presided, with much of the dignity which had characterized him in the past. Primrose carved the roast in an admirable manner; and Midas stored away so much of it, between potations of California wine, that he could scarcely arise from the table.

The dancing was renewed almost as soon as the feasting ended, and was continued until morning.

All in all the fandango was a marked success. The cowboys were especially enthusiastic over it; and for months whiled away lonely hours recounting its pleasures.

No further mishap or accident occurred to

mar the occasion. For the remainder of the night Colonel Midas eschewed dancing. Whether it was because of the ridiculous attitude it had placed him in or because he had gorged himself until he could scarcely move does not appear.

Whatever his feelings on that point, he became embittered toward Prince Primrose. And Primrose returned the favor by mentally terming Midas a conceited and awkward fool. And thus the fandango brought ill-will and enmity between two men who had been at least passive friends.

CHAPTER III.

MASCOT BILL.

THERE was one man present at the fandango—an important character as far as this story goes—whom I have not mentioned, preferring to give him a more extended notice than was allowable in the limits of the preceding chapter.

He was of the number who, arrayed in Mexican finery, pressed around Edith when she entered the dancing hall. Not a man of them all was attired more fantastically and gorgeously. His short Mexican jacket of scarlet cloth fairly glittered with gold buttons and silver braid. His white, ruffled shirt-front was a monument of patience and needle-work. A gaudy, crimson scarf belted his waist and held in place weapons of the most exquisite pattern. His sombrero was looped up at one side, and held in place by a golden dagger with jeweled hilt. And, what could not be said of all, this fanciful apparel was becoming to him.

He was tall and handsome, with a stately presence and a winning air. His face was smoothly shaven, with the exception of a heavy, dark mustache; and his black hair hung in wavy locks. His feet were incased in neatly polished boots, and his slender fingers were adorned with a profusion of rings.

He claimed to be a stranger in the country and gave his name as William Lawrence; stating, however, that he much preferred the title of Mascot Bill, which had been conferred on him by admiring friends in recognition of the good luck which always attended his presence.

He was especially attentive to Edith; and truth compels the statement that his gentlemanly appearance and fascinating manners made a decided impression on her maidenly fancy. Loudness of dress does not, in Silverland, always indicate that the wearer is a brainless dude. Many excellent men indulge their idiosyncracies in this respect, without attracting unfavorable comment. It is a custom borrowed from Mexico and sanctioned by usage.

Edith indicated her favorable opinion of Mascot Bill by dancing with him more frequently than with any one else.

This, Primrose noted, but he held his tongue. He was always a man of scanty words, and while he had many friends he had few confidants. It hurt him to see that Edith was attracted by the butterfly colors of these dandies. He could not help contrasting with them his own homely person and sober raiment. And the contrast, he was forced to acknowledge, was unfavorable to himself and his hopes.

It was a relief to Primrose when the dawning of a new day put an end to the festivities. The night had brought him no pleasure. It had been a piece of endurance to pass through it with a smiling face. The rippling words of the black-eyed senorita had often fallen on unheeding ears and he had smiled frequently without any earthly idea of what he was smiling about.

The words of Midas, too, had sorely tried him. Those who knew Primrose best had never accused him of cowardice. Yet blood had been shed for fewer and less offensive words than those spoken by Midas.

Mascot Bill did not ride away that morning with the departing guests. He had secured an introduction to Jacob Nettleton, and that gentleman had been so favorably impressed with Mascot's brilliant and dashing manner that he had extended him an invitation to remain a few days at the ranch;—an invitation Mascot promptly accepted.

The knowledge that Mascot was to remain was not pleasing to Primrose. He was not able to explain the deep dislike he had felt for him from the first. He would not acknowledge that it hurt him to know that Mascot would have more favorable opportunities than he for cultivating Edith's good opinion. Nevertheless, mask it as he might, the recurring thought stung him.

Although the round-up was over, there was much work to be done on the ranch; and in the multiplicity of his duties Primrose strove to forget. The marketable cattle were to be "cut out" of the herds and driven to the distant shipping point, the increase had to be branded, and a hundred minor matters were to be attended to before the bulk of the cowboys could be discharged for the season, and the cattle again turned upon the wide ranges.

Into this work Primrose threw himself with his accustomed energy and found in it something of a panacea for his lacerated feelings.

Within the ranch-house everything moved quietly and in its accustomed order. Nettleton devoted himself to the entertainment of his guest,

and Mascot Bill brought into play every exertion to render himself agreeable.

He humored Mr. Nettleson's foolish fancies and by artful and delicate flattery strove to win his way to Edith's heart. And it was not long until she caught herself listening for the sound of his footsteps, and yearning for the music of his voice. Her day dreams took on new shapes and wove into their fabric strange fancies and suggestions.

Yet she told herself she was not in love with Mascot Bill and never could be. He was a pleasant gentleman for a companion; but there was something about him that jarred with her thoughts and ideas of a lover and husband. What it was she did not seek to know. Still she could not repress her inward questionings. He was handsome, he was chivalrous, he was knightly. Was he honest and true? Was he sturdy and loyal, as she knew Primrose to be?

The "few days of Jacob Nettleton's invitation was a pleasantly indefinite term, and Mascot Bill seemed determined to give it a very liberal construction. A week slipped by and he gave no hint of an intention to depart. Long walks and moonlight rambles with Edith became matters of common occurrence.

"A life like this has long been my dream!" he said, as they were returning from one of these rambles. "It seems to me that you ought to be supremely happy here. I have drifted about in the world long enough to know that it has no equivalent for a quiet, rural or pastoral life. If Crusoe could have had congenial human companionship he would have been the happiest man living."

Edith was not worldly wise nor a philosopher, and she tossed her saucy head in a doubting way.

"I don't believe it. It seems to me that this humdrum existence is not the best this world can afford. If it is, I pity the majority of people."

"Congenial companionship is the point of emphasis in my statement!" he urged, adroitly. "Without that, this sort of life would not be preferable. One can get along out in the big world, some way or other, without some companionship; but not here, it seems to me. There, you have distractions that turn the mind away from itself."

"I assure you I have never so enjoyed a week in my life, as I have this, and it's because of your company. To know that it was not to end would be the perfection of bliss."

She gave him a startled look and the color swept to her fair face.

"Not yet!" he whispered to himself. "Not yet; or I will frighten the bird away. I must wait a little longer."

Then he deftly turned the conversation into a new channel; and by his jovial gayety quite drove from Edith's mind the memory of those words.

It was with Jacob Nettleton that he achieved his most gratifying success. The old ranch king had a mind that, in some things, was almost infantile. He was as full of whims and fancies as a child. These Mascot Bill studied and humored. For hours he sat in Nettleton's little room talking and reading to him, and telling wonderful stories of the past, in which there was some truth embroidered with much fiction.

Nettleton came to watch for him with kindling eye; and gave to him at each coming a welcome such as he usually accorded only to Edith.

If there was one thing above another that the ranch king delighted to talk about it was the cattle business; and this was a subject that Mascot Bill had at his tongue's end, with all of its terms and intricacies. For a half-day at a stretch he would mix these up with entertaining stories and rattle them over like a devotee counting his beads.

And that he knew the cattle business practically, as well as theoretically, he proceeded, ere long, to show to the entire satisfaction of even so prejudiced a doubter as Primrose.

His stories and boastings paved the way to request that he might be permitted to assist in the work now in progress on the ranch; and to this Nettleton readily consented.

Primrose's brow became the seat of Jove's thunders when Mascot Bill presented himself for duty. But that suave individual paid no more attention to the frowns than if they had been the blandest of smiles. He had Nettleton's order for his employment, and he knew that the foreman could not refuse him a place.

Primrose, determined to reveal Mascot's ignorance and humiliate him, gave him some of the most difficult tasks. To his surprise the work was done with skill and promptness. Mascot proved to be an adept with the branding-iron and as fine a roper as there was on the ranch.

By his joviality he won the good will of the cowboys, who had regarded him at the outset with ill-concealed scorn and distrust, and by his skill he compelled the outward respect of Primrose.

"But he's here for no good!" the latter murmured, time and again. "He's a villain, and I

know it. What he's driving at, though, I can't just make out.

"Unless"—and here his breath came quick and hard—"he hopes to win Edith and become virtually the owner of the Nettleton Ranch."

CHAPTER IV.

PRIMROSE ADRIFT.

THERE isn't a finer ranch in the country!" was Nettleton's proud assertion.

He leaned back in his easy-chair and looked at Mascot Bill, in a childish, confiding way.

"That is true!" was Mascot's rejoinder, "but it could be made finer; or at least more profitable."

He had artfully led the conversation up to this point, well knowing how Nettleton gloried in his ranch.

"I have had a great deal of experience in ranching, and I know that your profits could be easily increased a third, without adding a dollar to your investment or your expenses."

"In the first place, you have twice as many cowboys as are necessary, even in the busiest season. Then, that herd of cattle you sold last week ought to have brought a great deal more money than it did. Perhaps I oughtn't to say it, as I am only your guest, and—"

"Oh, speak out!" cried Nettleton. "You are my friend as well as my guest. If there is anything wrong I want to know it."

"I feared I might be trespassing in mentioning affairs that don't concern me. But I can't bear to see the confidence of so good a friend abused, without uttering a protest. Marketable cattle are in brisk demand now, and the prices are correspondingly good. I was surprised to find how good they really are. That bunch of cattle ought to have brought you more money than it did."

"I don't see how that can be!" said the ranch king, dully. "I've always got the top prices, and I understand that this year I got the best rates that were going."

"Perhaps you didn't get all that they sold for!" Mascot insinuated.

"What?"

Nettleton almost started to his feet in his surprise.

"I don't accuse anybody! I only made a suggestion."

"Primrose sold them!" the ranch king continued, in a bewildered way. "I have always regarded him as strictly honest."

"Primrose?" gasped the scheming villain. "Then I withdraw every assertion. I thought the sale was made by one of your cowboys. I wouldn't utter a word of reproach against Primrose. He is certainly honest!"

"That's what I've always thought. Can it be that he isn't?"

A wearied, nervous look was on the ranch king's face.

"One of my headaches has come on me again. It always does when I get a little excited. But I thank you, Mascot. You have proved a friend to me. I will look into the matter as soon as I feel better. You will have to leave me, now, for a little while."

"Don't!" protested Mascot. "I am very sorry I said anything. Let the matter drop where it is. I must have been wrong in my judgment."

"No, Mascot! I will look into it. It's a duty I owe to Edith. Now, I must rest, or my brain will take fire. Did you ever have your brain take fire? It's awful!"

He averted his face, in a tired way; and Mascot quietly left the room.

When he returned to it, that evening, the ranch king was sitting up. But his face was white and drawn.

"I have been thinking over what you said, Mascot. But I haven't come to any conclusion, yet. It's hard for me to suspect Primrose. He has served me a long time, and until now I have always had cause to think well of him. However, I mean to watch and wait; for there have been some things lately that I didn't altogether like, outside of what you mentioned."

"You must remember I haven't said a word against Primrose!" Mascot urged.

"But you have thought!" Nettleton insisted. "Your generosity and kind heart will not let you make open accusation. Is it not so?"

Mascot avoided this direct thrust, and soon after left the room.

"The spell is working!" he chuckled, gleefully. "The poison has found entrance into the old man's mind, and I'll trust it to do thorough work."

He never hinted to Edith the suspicions he had expressed to her father. She was bright and alert, and he feared to do so. On the contrary, at the first favorable opportunity, he cautioned Nettleton against mentioning the subject to her at all.

"It will only worry and annoy her," he said, "and be productive of no good."

He let no chance slip, however, for cultivating her good will. The long walks were confined wholly to the evenings, since he had taken service under Primrose. Of this he was secretly glad, for there is a spell in the silvery moonlight favorable to the conquests of Cupid.

"I could not endure the thought of leaving!"

he told her. "And so I became one of your father's cowboys. An humble position, but I am satisfied with it, under the circumstances."

He never spoke of love. But his hints were sometimes as suggestive as he dared to make them.

Edith was, to a certain extent, overcoming her intuitive aversion and distrust, and now listened complacently to words that had alarmed her at first. She could not bring herself to regard him in the light of a lover, but the barrier she had erected was being slowly removed.

As for Primrose, although he treated Mascot with external respect, he hated him with a bitter hatred. He saw through the sham conventionality that covered the scoundrel's real character, and knew that Mascot was ingratiating himself with the Nettletons for no worthy purpose.

Yet he held his peace. He was sure that protests would be worse than useless. Should he make them, Edith would think they were prompted by jealousy, and Jacob Nettleton would be led into the belief that he feared Mascot's increasing influence.

With the growth of his power Mascot began to exhibit an insolence that had been wholly absent. He became voluble with directions and advice as to the management of affairs; all tending to irritate Primrose.

This insolence increased, as the days passed; for his hold upon Nettleton and the latter's suspicions of Primrose were constantly growing.

At last there came an open rupture. The ranch work was about done for the season and most of the extra cowboys had been paid off and dismissed. A small bunch of cattle were to be driven to a distant valley where the grazing was usually excellent. Primrose requested Mascot to take charge of this drove.

"Do it yourself!" was Mascot's angry rejoinder. "I've been working like a slave for two weeks and I'm played out. Ever since I've been here you've placed on me the hardest work there was to do."

"That's a lie!" cried Primrose, hotly. "You've soldiered more than any other man on the ranch."

Mascot flushed and dropped his hand to his weapons; but there was a glitter in Primrose's steely eyes that warned him to go slow.

"I'll make you suffer for that, yet!" he exclaimed, red with rage. "No man can call me a liar with impunity."

"Bah! Your threats don't alarm me. While you're under me you'll have to obey orders or take the consequences."

"Well, I won't take charge of that herd!" Mascot declared, emphatically.

"Then you'll leave the ranch!"

"And I won't leave the ranch. Mr. Nettleton employed me; and I will remain until he tells me to quit. I don't recognize any other authority in the matter."

"If you are not made to quit, I will!" Primrose asserted, as he set spurs to his pony and galloped toward the ranch building.

He was boiling with rage, as he entered Nettleton's room.

The ranch king started up, a puzzled look on his face. It had been weeks since Primrose had last visited him.

"Mr. Nettleton, affairs on this ranch have reached a point that is simply unendurable!" he began, impetuously. "A man has been given a place under me, who refuses to obey my commands or recognize my authority as foreman. I have come to ask that he be discharged."

A tinge of red had crept into Nettleton's white cheeks.

"Who is it?" he questioned. "And what has he done?"

"It is Mascot Bill. His insolence has become intolerable, and this morning he flatly refused to obey me."

The slanderous whispers of Mascot Bill surged hotly through the ranch king's weakened brain. The suggestion came that Primrose doubtless had other causes for wishing Mascot's dismissal.

"Is that the real reason that brings you here?" he asked, coldly.

"What do you mean?" Primrose demanded.

"Simply that I think you have another motive!" was the astounding statement.

Primrose trembled, and turned red and white by turns. Never before had Nettleton doubted his word.

"You certainly are not yourself, to-day, Mr. Nettleton, or you would not say that."

"Oh, I am all right!" Nettleton returned. "I know you think I'm a little weak in my head since that fall; but I'm not quite so weak as you may believe. You are afraid Mascot will unearth some of your double-dealing, perhaps, and therefore you want him dismissed."

"He has been lying to you about something, I can see!" Primrose asserted. "What has he said?"

"I don't care to make a statement, Mr. Primrose. You can consider yourself discharged. I shall appoint Mascot to your place. I will forward your money to whatever address you may leave."

He had worked himself into a towering passion, and seemed almost on the point of falling

in a fit. Primrose saw that it would be useless to argue with him.

Without a word he turned about and left the room. He walked out of the house, unhitched his pony and mounted it. The temptation was strong upon him to ride out to where he had left the cowboys, and shoot Mascot Bill down in his tracks. But he controlled this murderous desire; and, setting spurs to the pony, galloped away without a backward glance.

CHAPTER V.

WAXY JOE'S ALLY.

EDITH was shocked when she learned what had occurred. But the shock was not as severe as it might have been had the information come through another channel. Mascot Bill was the first to break the news to her; and he did it in a way to lay the blame wholly on Primrose.

Nevertheless the affair left on Edith's mind a feeling of regret. Primrose had always been markedly kind to her. Now that he was gone his good qualities were brought before her in a newer and more favorable light. She was sorry he had ridden off without a word of farewell.

There was one person on the ranch to whom the information came like a blinding blow. That was Waxy Joe, an eccentric, feeble-minded youth, who was a sort of pensioned servitor of Edith's.

Joe had straggled to the ranch some years before, and had proven himself so kind-hearted and so willing to work that he was permitted to remain.

At that time Joe's great ambition was to be a cowboy. With that purpose in view he had drifted West. His mind had become filled with silly dreams of the glorious possibilities of a cowboy's career, and he longed to verify them. He discovered, as many another foolish boy has done, that the reality was not what he had pictured it. He learned that a cowboy's life is one round of unceasing toil. That it is filled with hard and disagreeable work instead of romantic adventures. That a cowboy is often cold, hungry and wet. That he is scorched by the heat and drenched by the rain. That he is often tortured by thirst, or forced to drink poisonous alkali water or liquid mud that a dog would turn from in disdain.

All these things Waxy Joe had learned by experience and observation; and he gladly yielded up his vaulting ambition to become the personal servant of Edith Nettleton.

Primrose had been exceptionally kind to him. It was not in the nature of the ex-foreman to be otherwise. And Waxy Joe returned this kindness with an affectionate and loyal regard.

When the startling intelligence reached him, he bounded up the stairway leading to Edith's room, two steps at a time.

"What's the matter with Primrose, Miss Edith, that he's gone? I know that air Mascot Bill's the cause o' it!"

The terrible news of the affair surged over him like a wave, and he gave way to a flood of tears.

His distress touched her. She had been thinking of Primrose and was in a sympathetic mood.

"You mustn't talk so, Joe!" she cautioned, tears glistening in her own eyes. "Mr. Primrose deserved dismissal, if I understand the case rightly. He wantonly and grossly insulted Mascot, forgetful of the fact that he is our guest."

"I don't believe a word of it!" protested Joe. "That air Mascot is a bloody villain. I kin see it in his eyes. An', oh dear! he's to be the new foreman. If he is, I'll never go 'bout the corals or out on the range while he stays hyer."

"Why not, Joe?"

"'Cause he abuses me an' makes fun o' me. He called me a fool an' a lunk-head, on'y yister-day."

"Perhaps you gave him cause, Joe! Perhaps you angered him. Remember you mustn't speak disrespectfully of him."

"I won't, if you say so; but he's a bloody villain. I didn't give him no cause neither. An' he kicked me 'tother day when I didn't jump round quite fast enough to suit him."

"Joe! Joe! Surely he didn't do that! You must be careful what you say."

"Yes, he did!" Joe insisted. "He kicked me hard; and I won't never go near him ag'in—that's what I won't. Couldn't you git Prince Primrose to come back ag'in, Miss Edith? He'd come, I know, if you'd on'y send fer him."

"No; I can't do that!" straightening up stiffly. "Mascot may have done wrong in some things, but Primrose had no right to insult him the way he did."

She averted her face; and Waxy Joe crept, tremblingly, down the stairs.

Mascot Bill signaled his entrance into authority by notifying Tony Bowers, one of the most trusty cowboys on the place, that his services would not be required after that week.

At this there was almost a revolt, for Tony was a general favorite and had given no occasion for dismissal.

The front of his offending was that he had been, practically, Primrose's trusty lieutenant and so was supposed to be friendly to his interests.

Tony was a character, in many respects. He was a little man, bandy-legged from too much

horseback riding, and with a cowboy's genuine love of excitement and out-door life. As a revolver expert he had few equals in the Southwest. So quick was he with his favorite weapon and so unerring his aim, that he was universally known as the pistol king.

Now it chanced that Tony had been making love in a rather fervent manner to pretty Dolly Dimple, who was the general servant and also Edith's maid. And when it came to Dolly's ears that Tony was to leave the ranch, she vowed she would not remain a moment after he left.

Thus Waxy Joe found in Dolly an enthusiastic and belligerent ally.

Marching straight up to Edith's room, she placed her hands behind her back and elevated her chin in the air.

"I suppose we'll all be goin' next miss!" without stopping to explain her errand. "Prince Primrose is gone, an' I'm told that Tony is to foller 'im. We never had any trouble till this jay-bird, with his fine feathers, come onto the place."

"Why, what's the matter, now, Dolly?" Edith questioned. "You're bristling like a porcupine!"

"Jist what I said, miss! It's all along o' that Mascot. An' I come to give you warnin'! If Tony is druv off the place by the likes o' him, I'm a-goin', too."

"Why, is Tony to leave?"

"Mascot told him he could look fer another place after this week. An' it's jist because he's a friend o' Primrose. He said he was a-goin' to cut down the force an' wouldn't need Tony. But I know a thing er two, as well as some other folks. Tony staid here steady ever sence Primrose first came; an' now he's got to go. Mascot's plannin' some dirty work, I'll be boun', an' wants to git him out o' the way."

Dolly's rosy cheeks glowed with indignation and her eyes shone like stars.

"I don't see that I can do anything!" Edith replied, somewhat startled and bewildered. "Mascot has charge of the cowboys and has authority to dismiss one if he wishes."

"Then I go, too. Mark that down!"

Dolly flounced from the room and jumped down the stairway, every step sounding a menace.

As has been said, Edith was somewhat startled and bewildered. She had been training herself to look with favor on the dashing, brilliant man who called himself Mascot. She had almost succeeded in casting from her heart her first distrust of him. Was it to be brought back on his accession to power?

The discharge of Primrose had pained her. Dolly's intelligence and threat brought something of alarm. Could it be possible that Mascot was not the friend he professed to be? What if he was the scoundrel that Waxy Joe and Dolly Dimple declared? The suggestion was full of horrible possibilities.

She was charitable by nature and slow to suspect. It was unkind and cruel, she argued, to harbor such thoughts against a man who had treated her with such consideration. There was really no proof against him. Waxy Joe's intuitions were notoriously unreliable and Dolly's were not much better.

There was one thing, though, that brought disquiet. Dolly certainly meant to leave if Tony did. And they could scarcely get along at the ranch without Dolly.

After thinking the matter over until her head fairly ached, Edith went to her father's room.

Nettleton was sitting up in an easy-chair, reading out of a big, bi-columned book. The tumult had not reached him. As he sat there, so quiet and peaceful, his snowy hair floating over the pillow that was scarcely whiter, Edith almost regretted that she had ventured to disturb him.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, looking up with the proud smile with which he always greeted her.

She knelt at his side, placed one arm about his neck and told him why she had come.

Edith was still his baby and her wish the supreme law.

"The scoundrel!" he sputtered. "He is carrying things with altogether too high a hand. I'll discharge him, as I did Primrose, if he isn't careful."

Edith waited for him to get rid of his sudden spleen; and then made her request.

"Issue an order that Tony is to be kept in your employment. That will be sufficient. Mascot may have been prompted by the best of motives. I prefer to think so, at least. You know he has been very kind to us, father."

"Why shouldn't he be?" roared the ranch king. "Haven't we done everything for him?"

"Now you must quiet down, father! Indeed you must! I have little doubt that Mascot meant it for the best. You know he said he thought it would be advisable to reduce the force."

"So he did! So he did!" admitted the ranch king. "I'd forgot that!"

"And you'll greet him kindly? But let him know that you want Tony to remain."

Nettleton promised compliance, and that

evening issued orders in accordance with Edith's wishes.

So Tony remained on the ranch, a thorn in Mascot's flesh, and Dolly Dimple smiled in triumph.

CHAPTER VI.

PARADISE GULCH.

THE mind of Prince Primrose was in a volcanic state as he rode away from the Nettleton Ranch. Thus had his years of toil for Jacob Nettleton been rewarded! Cast aside and spurned for this new favorite; his motives impeached; his honor and integrity questioned. There was plenty of food for bitter thought in it all.

Of Edith he could scarcely bear to think. Day by day, with hot and seething jealousy, he had watched the growing intimacy between her and Mascot Bill. He had scarcely ever ventured to hope that he might win her for his own. He had pictured her in a happy home, the pride and joy of a loving and worthy husband. That picture, dim and distinct as it had always been, brought to him a pain that was not unpleasant, because of his self-abnegation and pure love for her.

But to know that she was encouraging the attentions of such a man as Mascot, brought acute mental tortures. Mascot was a base scoundrel, who was wholly unworthy of her, and could only make her unhappy. A union with such a man could be nothing less than a life-long agony.

He headed his pony toward Paradise Gulch. He had some acquaintances in the town; and he thought that perhaps he might obtain remunerative employment there. It was absolutely necessary that he should do something. His pony and a few hundred dollars, the savings of his salary, were all he had between himself and actual need.

This did not worry him, however. He knew he could find something to do, even though the pay might be small. He had knocked about the world a great deal, and in that he had never failed. He was well-educated, industrious and not above work, and such men always succeed.

Paradise Gulch was less than a dozen miles from the Nettleton Ranch, and he reached it by mid-afternoon. It was a silver-mining town, and typical of its class. The ragged, sun-baked mountains flanked it on three sides, and thrust something of their rocky inequalities into its very streets.

Its inhabitants were mostly miners, and were at work, when he rode in; thus giving to the place a desolate and deserted appearance. Some of the business men and clerks were fanning themselves beneath the wide, white awnings; and groups of sports and gamblers loitered in and around the saloons and gambling-hells.

Primrose nodded now and then to an acquaintance as he rode along. He was already beginning to feel better. The interests and sympathies here were so different from those he had quitted that they brought a sense of relief.

He left the pony at a livery stable and then hunted up a boarding-house. The last was no difficult task, for boarding-houses of every grade and quality literally abounded. They were outnumbered only by the saloons. As his eye ran down the principal street he was almost convinced that every third house was a whisky shop.

"The citizens of Paradise Gulch certainly can't lack for liquid refreshments," was his mental comment.

The second night after reaching the town he dropped into one of the principal saloons. He had no very well defined motive for doing so. He was not a drinking man, and never gambled. The streets were rather dark and cheerless, the dull boarding-house offered no congenial company, and the bright lights and jolly laughter issuing from the saloon were very attractive.

For a time he stood lazily leaning against one end of the bar, watching the shifting scene and the reckless, thirsty throng. Becoming somewhat tired, he finally crossed the room and took a seat upon a long bench that stood there.

A movable screen shut off a little space just back of this, and he had sat there but a few minutes when the sound of voices came to him from behind this screen.

There was a familiar ring about them, but they were low and muffled. He believed he knew the owners of the voices, and, as he listened, this belief deepened.

Then something was whispered about "Primrose" and the "Nettleton Ranch."

He disliked the idea of playing spy or eaves-dropping, but in this case the temptation was too great to be resisted. He leaned over and applied his ear to the screen. The words were not more distinct. There were two men—he could determine that—and they were talking about him and the Nettletons. More than that he could not make out.

His curiosity was worked up to a pitch that demanded gratification. He determined to learn who these men were, even if he had to rush into peril to accomplish it. He could not

content himself to wait until they came out. He feared, also, that they might leave by the rear entrance. Probably they would do that, if they did not wish to be seen together.

He got up and walked boldly around the sheltering screen, as if he intended to go out the back way. His suspicions were verified. The speakers were Mascot Bill and Colonel Midas.

He gave them a searching glance as he passed; and they sprang to their feet.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" demanded Mascot Bill, growing very red in the face. "You have been spying on us!"

"I didn't know this corner was reserved for your especial benefit!" sneered Primrose. "I understand it was free to whoever chose to occupy it."

Colonel Midas was purpling apoplectically.

"You are a sneaking villain!" he sputtered, bobbing his neckless head.

"Perhaps I am, colonel; but I never have occasion to hide behind screens to do my scheming."

"What do you mean by that, sir? What do you mean by that?" howled Midas, advancing, wrathfully. "Do you mean to insinuate anything against my good name? I'd have you know, sir, that I'm as favorably known as any citizen of Paradise Gulch!"

"Which is notorious for its honorable citizens!" mockingly.

Mascot Bill had been edging toward Primrose; and now leaped upon him, drawing a murderous-looking knife as he did so. The doughty colonel came to Mascot's assistance and attempted to clasp Primrose about the legs.

It was an unfortunate movement. Primrose planted one heavy boot in Midas's protuberant stomach; and the latter rolled upon the floor, gasping and snorting in agony.

At the same moment he avoided Mascot's deadly rush, tore the uplifted knife from his grasp and closed with him in a bear-like hug.

The loud conversation in the main room, supplemented as it was by boisterous laughter and maudlin songs, prevented the struggle from attracting any attention.

Mascot Bill was no unworthy foe, as Primrose soon found. His height and the reach of his sinewy arms gave him a decided advantage. Primrose was almost as tall, somewhat stronger, but not as lithe and eel-like.

The struggle that followed was a terrible one; for each exerted himself to the utmost to gain the ascendancy. There was another knife in Mascot Bill's scarf, and this the scoundrel tried again and again to draw. Primrose, however, had hold of his knife-hand and foiled him in every attempt.

Midas ceased his gasping, struggled to his feet and once more approached the combatants. Round and round he circled, watching for an opening.

Before he found it, the two men fell with a crash. Primrose by a dextrous twist had thrown Mascot Bill headlong. Clutching him by the throat he was about to rain a series of blows upon the villain's upturned face, when Midas seized him by the collar, at the same time roaring:

"Help! Help! Murder!"

The cries brought a host of men tumbling in from the bar-room.

"What's the matter?" demanded the proprietor.

"Can't you see?" shouted Midas, dancing about in a very delirium. "He's killing Mr. Lawrence! Pull him off! Pull him off!"

A dozen hands seized Primrose and dragged him from his prostrate foe.

A sickly smile overspread the face of Mascot Bill, as he arose to his feet.

"Two men knocked out o' time by one!" cried a loud-voiced miner. "I'm willin' to treat the man that done it."

"He surprised us and attempted to kill my friend here!" gurgled Midas. "He ought to be arrested and punished for it."

"Don't!" whispered Mascot. "Better drop the thing! If this gets into the courts he may tell what we were talking about. I'm much afraid that he heard it."

The sputtering colonel almost fainted at the suggestion.

"We're willing to let the matter drop, though, without demanding an arrest!" he continued. "It was purely a personal affair, and as no one was seriously injured, we—that is—"

The colonel began a hopeless floundering and found himself quite unable to finish.

"Come," whispered Mascot, "let's be going, before the crowd gets too inquisitive. They're inclined to favor Primrose, as he was one against two."

He slipped his hand through Midas's arm and almost dragged him from the room and into the street.

When they were gone the hero-worshipping miner repeated his desire to treat the man who had had the grit to tackle two, single-handed; and was much disgusted when Primrose informed him that he never touched liquor.

Primrose made no explanation of how the combat had commenced, and no one cared to question him. Saloon fights were too common to attract more than a moment's notice. The

crowd melted away; and in a little while he found himself again alone.

"Now, what had I better do?" was his mental question. "Those scamps were plotting something against the people at the ranch. Shall I go back there and give them warning, or write a letter? What could I say, if I did so? I really know nothing. My knowledge is entirely in the nature of suspicion. I didn't hardly hear enough to justify me in forming an opinion."

He became so lost in thought that he almost forgot where he was and what was going on about him.

"No!" he muttered, at last. "It would be of no use. I can't make definite charges; and they'd think, as before, that I'm actuated solely by malice. Whatever it is that threatens them they will have to meet it as best they can. And, then, why should I worry about it? They have cast me adrift—not caring, apparently, whether I live or die!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE PISTOL KING PRACTICING.

TONY BOWERS, the pistol king, sat in his cozy kitchen of the ranch-house, his revolver in his belt and his rope on the floor convenient to his hand.

"I never like to be too fur from my weepens!" he said, when questioned in regard to this eccentricity. "An' I don't intend to, long's they ain't no law ag'in it. A rope's a mighty handy thing; but what good'll it do you, if it's hangin' somewhere on yer saddle when you need it most? When houses gits too fine fer me to take my rope into 'em they gits too fine fer me."

Dolly Dimple, with plump arms bare and cheeks like June roses, was hustling about, setting things to rights and finishing up her evening's work.

Tony followed her every movement with proud eyes.

"Hanged if she don't look sweet enough to eat!" he muttered, involuntarily smacking his lips. "Red apples couldn't be temptin'er'n them cheeks."

"I say, Dolly!" aloud. "You brought the folks 'round lively. That was fine, that was! It tumbled Mascot in a heap, jist like a roped steer. I understand you tol' 'em if I had to git, you'd git likewise, instantar."

"Maby I didn't mean it jist as strong as I said!" naively, and with a toss of her head. "Leastways, you needn't count on it too shore. I had to skeer 'em some, you know!"

"That's all right, Dolly. You needn't confess more'n you're 'bleeged to. But what I want to know is, what on airth air they goin' to do when you go to housekeepin' fer me?"

"That's a likely question, Tony, now ain't it? When you ain't got so much as a dug-out set in a hillside! No doubt they're a-worritin' themselves into quick consumption over that! An' I ain't said yit that I'd have you. I've heern o' people countin' their chickens 'fore they were hatched!"

"Oh, but you'll have me, Dolly! They ain't ary question 'bout it. You can't help yerself, fer it's writ in the books. I had my forchen told at Paradise Gulch less'n a month ago, an' the old 'oman said it was in the coffee-groun's. So, you might's well make up yer mind to it."

"What I wanted to ask you, though, especial, was yer opinion o' Mascot. Things ain't workin' jist right on this ranch to suit me. Waxy says 'at he's a bloody villain; an' hang me if I don't b'leeve it."

Dolly gave a final flourish with her wiping-cloth, hung it in its proper place and placed the dishes in the cup-board. Then she came and sat down by his side.

"What do I think? W'y, that Waxy Joe's no fool, if he ain't smart."

Tony startled her by giving her a bear-like hug.

"I knowed ye'd say that, Dolly. Yer head ain't all curls an' hair-pins, after all! Now, the question is, kin we do anything? Primrose is gone. If he was hyer I wouldn't worry. Mascot's kerryin' things with a high han'. Ever' one o' the boys that he thought was frien'ly to Primrose has been discharged, and their places has been given to new men. Men that I don't know an' that I'm afeard to talk to on the subjec'. If you hadn't set yer foot down like you did, I'd 'a' gone with the rest o' the bunch."

He leaned over, as he concluded, and gave her a hasty kiss.

"Don't!" she protested, rubbing her face with her apron.

"It seemed like too good a chance to lose, Dolly. You'll have to give me an opportunity to practice, I 'low. They call me the pistol king, but my aim's gitten' kind o' shaky an' on-stiddy o' late. An' if things goes on like they air, they's no tellin' how soon I'll have use fer it."

"But you kissed me on the nose!" Dolly protested.

"Another proof that I'm out o' practice!" he cried, giving her a resounding smack on the lips. "Hit plum center that time, I know."

She made a wry face and twisted away from him.

"I don't see how that's goin' to help you in pistol-shootin'!"

"Which goes to show that you don't reely know anything 'bout the bizness. It helps in the aimin', an' aimin' right is the heft o' the trick."

"But 'bout this air Mascot! You 'most made me fergit what I was talkin' 'bout. Do you s'pose we kin do anything? He's a-trailin' a powerful long picket rope, an' it'd do me oceans o' good to tangle him up on it."

"I don't know!" Dolly replied, after a thoughtful pause. "We might; an' ag'in we mightn't."

This was pleasantly indefinite; but it seemed to strike Tony as being the sum of oracular wisdom.

"That air's so."

"We mightn't succeed," supplemented Dolly, "but that needn't hender us frum tryin'. If a person never tries they can't do anything."

"True as gospel!" Tony asserted, bobbing his head. "If they don't try they can't do nothin'. Do you reckon now, Dolly, that we'd better try?"

"I reckon we had; if we on'y knowed what to try. That's the trouble."

"Yes; that's the trouble!"

"Have you any idee o' what'd be best?"

"Not in p'tickler, Dolly. How'd it do fer me to rope this Mascot Bill some dark night, an' choke the life out o' him, if he didn't tell what he's up to?"

"Twouldn't do!" Dolly asserted.

"Was afeard it wouldn't. I don't know, then, 'less I'd draw a bead on him sometime, when they ain't no one 'round."

"Twouldn't do!" Dolly declared again, with an emphatic shake of the head. "You'd git hung fer it, likely."

"An' then you couldn't keep house in that dug-out I'm plannin' fer!"

"I tell you what we kin do, though!" bending forward and whispering the words: "We kin watch!"

"Eh?"

"We kin watch. Maby we kin find out somethin' that'll open the eyes o' Miss Edith and Mr. Nettleton."

"If they was ever any fools wrapped up in a scoundrel, it's them!" Tony exclaimed, in disgust. "They think he's a angel 'cause he wears a scarlet jacket with gold buttons on it. Primrose dressed common, an' I'm afeard it told ag'inst him. But he was a man, ever' inch o' him, no diffrunce what he wore."

"Yes; he was!" Dolly assented. "An' he thought a power o' Miss Edith. But he never said nothin', I'm confident. He was jist nacherly tongue-tied when he was with her!"

"Same's I am, when you're around."

"I've never seen the time, yit, when your tongue stopped clackin'." Tony Bowers; an' never will while you're livin'!"

From the way he laughed Tony seemed delighted at the compliment.

"Yes; we kin watch; an' maby we kin learn somethin' that'll open their eyes!" Dolly continued, returning to the subject of greatest interest. "Seems to me the turnin' off o' so many men 'ud make 'em suspicious; but it don't."

"That fellow's got a tongue slicker'n new ice!" Tony declared. "If you'll on'y listen to him he kin make you believe anything. I'll warrant ye he's had a yarn ready to explain that."

"I s'pose he had!" assentingly. "An' he'll spin 'em fast as he needs 'em."

"Now, my idee is: you watch him out on the range. See if any s'picious-lookin' men comes 'round, an' try to hear what he says to 'em. Keep your eyes an' ears open; an' if he's up to any scaly tricks—like we think he is—somethin' 'll prob'ly come o' your watchin' an' listenin'."

"As fer me I'll keep an eye on him when he's in the house an' around with Miss Edith. An' I'll drop a word at ever' chance, that'll maby tend to set her ag'in' him. I'll have lots o' opportunities fer doin' that, an' I won't let many o' 'em pass me."

"Workin' together that way we ought to 'complish somethin'!"

"An' we will!" asserted Tony, catching enthusiasm from this calm statement of her plan. "I'll watch him same's a hawk watches a prairie-dog hole."

"An' there's one thing more!" said Dolly: "Find out where Primrose is, an' git ready to send word to him as quick's kin be done, if he's needed."

"He's at Paradise Gulch; an' has opened an assayer's office. I saw one o' the boys yisterday that had been to his shop and talked with him; an' he 'lowed frum th' looks o' things that he was doin' well an' makin' money hand over fist."

"I'm afeard, though, that he wouldn't chip into this game, if we called on him. He's not feelin' overly well toward folks hereabouts, an' he's got good reason fer not. He didn't say much, the feller said, but he could see that frum what little he did say."

"Oh, he'll come! I know he will," Dolly averred, hopefully. "I ain't afeard o' that, if the proper kind o' word is sent. He'd come in a minute, no matter how he's feelin' now, if he thought Miss Edith needed him. Likely he wouldn't come fer the old gentleman, but he'll come fer her!"

As Dolly was never wrong in her guesses, of course she must be right on this occasion, and Tony expressed his satisfaction accordingly.

Having exhausted the subject, Tony resumed his "pistol practice," as he termed it, and, a little later retired, trailing his *riata*.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEN TOWSLEY.

THE next morning a horseman rode furiously up to the ranch-house. The horse was reeking with sweat, and the man seemed almost exhausted.

"Arm yourselves!" he shouted. "Arm yourselves! The Injuns air on the rampage south-east o' hyer!"

He was instantly surrounded by an anxious and excited group.

In answer to their questions he stated that his name was Ben Towsley; that he had been out on a hunting trip and stumbled on the Indians quite unawares; that they had fired on him, and he had only escaped by hard riding. They were in war-paint, and he believed were contemplating a raid on the ranches of that section.

Jacob Nettleton and Edith came out, and after hearing his story invited him into the house.

"You are exhausted," said Nettleton. "Come in and have something to eat and rest. Your horse will be looked after."

He then ordered Mascot Bill to get the place in readiness for an attack, and led the way into the building.

"Sech another ride I never had," Towsley asserted, sinking into the proffered chair. "It was a narrer escape, I tell you."

He was a broad-shouldered man of forty, with heavy beard, and wearing citizen's clothing.

"Which way were they headed?" questioned Edith.

"That I couldn't tell, miss! I come on 'em suddent, an' they took after me. When they found they couldn't overtake me they hauled off, an' I don't know where they went."

"I was out lookin' fer antelopes an' black-tailed deer. Colonel Midas is monstrous fond of venison, an' I tol' him I'd fetch him a deer, if there was one to be found in the country."

"Colonel Midas?" said the ranch king. "Then you're acquainted with him?"

"Best o' frien's, me an' the colonel air! Knowed each other fer years. Fine man is the colonel! Seems to me I've heard him speak o' you folks."

"No doubt. The colonel is an old acquaintance of ours, and, as you say, a fine man!"

It pleased the ranch king to praise those he regarded highly; and Midas was one of the latter.

Tony Bowers poked his head in at the door, and announced that the little band of cowboys was mounted and armed, and awaiting orders.

Ben Towsley leaped to his feet.

"I must go along!" he exclaimed. "I think I can guide to the very spot where the rascals was."

Nettleton insisted that he should remain and recruit his strength. Towsley declared he was sufficiently rested.

"Git me a new hoss!" he requested. "Then I'll drink a cup o' hot coffee an' eat a few bites, an' be ready fer ye!"

The coffee and a substantial breakfast was placed before him. He ate ravenously, and seemed a new man.

Then he rode away with Mascot Bill, at the head of the cowboys.

A ride of two hours brought them to the place where Towsley asserted he had been fired on. No Indians were to be seen, but an examination showed that a troop of ponies had been there, and had made for the hills. There was nothing to show that they were ridden by Indians, or in fact that they were not wild ponies; but no one dreamed of questioning Ben Towsley's statement.

"They've struck back into the mountains," he said. "They don't seem to have done any damage yet, and likely they'll give up the raid sence I got away from 'em. They know that the ranchers will be ready for 'em now, an' that they'll git more fightin' than booty. That's the way with Injuns. They'll drop the most promisin' raid, an' take the back track if everything don't go to suit 'em, or their 'medicine' ain't jest right. They're a queer lot."

It seemed that Towsley was correct. The trail was followed to the edge of the mountains, where it was lost among the rocks. No Indians were sighted.

On returning to the ranch word was sent to neighboring cattlemen. For a week a close watch was kept, but the raiding savages did not put in an appearance.

Ben Towsley, at Nettleton's request, made the ranch the headquarters for his hunting trips. He did not appear to be an expert hunter. Occasionally he secured some game, and sent it with a letter to his friend Midas.

It soon became evident, however, that he much preferred lounging about the ranch-house and stables to hunting. He especially loved

brandy hot, and a game of cards with pleasant company. That pleasant company universally proved to be Jacob Nettleton.

Towsley seemed a jolly, whole-souled fellow, with a heart like an open book—and the ranch king was wonderfully drawn to him. For hours at a time they sat over a table in Nettleton's little room, sipping brandy and manipulating the pasteboards.

Nettleton, when at himself, had never been a drinking or gambling man. Now he took to both readily. Towsley filled a niche in his life which had been empty. Before he came the ranch king had passed many silent, lonely hours. Edith was loving and kind, but she could not be expected to immerse herself with him constantly. Mascot Bill was an entertaining talker, but most of his time was now occupied. Ben Towsley filled the void.

Tony Bowers regarded Towsley as an intruder, and announced in confidence to Dolly his belief that evil would come of his presence there.

"There's a bad look in his eye; an' he's too thick with that air Mascot."

Edith at first paid little attention to his comings and goings. Hospitality is one of the cardinal virtues on the Western ranges. Her father had frequently entertained strangers similarly circumstanced.

But the scent of the brandy fumes at length aroused her. And when she found her father, one day, almost helplessly intoxicated she was astounded and indignant. Mascot Bill took no part in these drinking bouts and appeared to have no knowledge of them. He still pressed his attentions upon Edith, in a delicate way; and she, while she did not especially encourage him, did not repulse him.

When her father recovered from his semi-imbecile condition she reproached him for what he had done and requested that Ben Towsley be sent adrift.

"He is bringing you into disgrace, father! You never touched liquor before he came here!"

"Tut! Tut!" spluttered the humiliated, but infatuated ranch king. "I'm old enough to take care of myself, Edith! There's no harm in Towsley. He's a jolly, good fellow; and the best company I ever saw. I took a little too much brandy that time, I know; but I'll be more careful on that point, hereafter. It flies to my head, easy. Towsley can drink twice as much as I can, and it won't touch him."

"But I want you to let it alone, altogether, father. And you can't do that while he's here tempting you."

"But I don't want him to go away!" Nettleton protested. "It's little enough pleasure I have at best; and he's such a lively, companionable fellow. I'll be more careful with the brandy. Won't that do, puss? You're always worrying needlessly about me."

Urge as she might she could not move him from that point; and Ben Towsley remained, in spite of her protests.

Dolly, in accordance with the "plan" that she had outlined to Tony, watched Towsley's every movement with a watchful and jealous eye. She believed his object there was to win Nettleton's money. She became convinced of this when, on passing the door, she heard the chink of coin.

She determined to satisfy herself on this point and to collect evidence sufficient to prove to Edith that Towsley was no friend to the family.

For almost a week she watched and waited for a favorable opportunity to verify her suspicions. It came at last. She casually heard Towsley make an appointment to meet Nettleton in his room that night.

The ranch king usually went out about dusk for a few turns about the grounds. While he was absent she slipped into the room.

She had scarcely entered it before she heard him returning with Towsley. There was a closet, the door of which stood partially ajar, and into this she hastened, having no time to look for any other place of concealment. And this really seemed to answer her purposes exactly; for she would be concealed and, through the half-open door, could see all that took place in the room. In her haste she overlooked the fact that she had provided no mode of egress.

The closet was filled with articles of clothing, most of which were suspended from hooks. Enveloping herself in the clothing she peered out into the room, a triumphant smile on her lips.

Towsley seated himself at the table; and with an air of proprietorship, drew a pack of cards, two glasses and a brandy bottle from the drawer beneath it.

"Sit down!" he said, motioning Nettleton to a chair at the opposite side and filling the glasses from the bottle. "I've got a new trick or two to learn you about that game. An' they're worth learnin', if fer no other reason than that the sports won't never be able to take you in on 'em. I've knowed men to give fifty dollars to learn one of 'em. Of course I know you'll never want to use 'em yourself ag'in' anybody. I wouldn't, cause they ain't square; an' I never play nothin' but a square game. There's thousan's o' men that do, though, an' that's the way they pick the tenderfeet so easy."

He shoved one of the glasses across to Nettleton, as the latter seated himself.

The ranch king barely touched the liquor; then set the glass down.

"Swaller it! Swaller it!" urged Towsley. "Drink the hull of it. It'll do you good."

Nettleton tasted it again, but refused to drink deeply.

"Been taking a little too much lately," he explained, "and thought I'd slow up."

Dolly moved among the clothing in order to get a better view; and was at once seized with an almost irresistible desire to sneeze. To her horror she remembered that she had only a few days before, sprinkled some of the articles of clothing with snuff, to prevent the ravages of moth, which Mr. Nettleton had complained of. This she had forgotten; and now her nose, eyes and mouth seemed literally filled with the choking, irritating stuff.

"Oh, I will die in here!" she whispered, stuffing her handkerchief into her mouth and breathing very hard to prevent an explosion.

"As I was sayin', these tricks are considered very vallyble. There ain't one gambler in a thousand, I reckon, that don't cheat; and the cutest cheater is the luckiest man. The way cards is played now'days, it's trickery inst'id o' luck that wins. Hello! what was that?"

Ben Towsley dropped the pack he had been skillfully shuffling and wheeled about in his chair.

The sound of a suppressed sneeze had reached him.

"Oh, dear!" thought Dolly, cowering in fear. "They'll find me, an' whatever will I do? I jist can't hold in much longer. Oh, oh, kch-kch kch—kch—kch!"

"There it is ag'in!" exclaimed Towsley, starting up. "Where'd that come frum? Is there a room beyond this?"

Nettleton had heard the sneezing that time. It was muffled and suppressed, and it was difficult to determine its direction.

"Yes, there's a room beyond there; but it's never occupied. We use it for an old lumber-room."

"There is somebody in it!" Towsley declared.

"An' I'll bet they're spying on us."

He thought of Edith; but he dared not mention that thought to the ranch king.

"What would any one be spying for?" Nettleton asked, innocently.

"I don't know! Robbery, mebbe. I'm goin' to find out. You stay hyer a minute. The back hall leads into that room, don't it?"

He was so certain it did, that he bounded away without stopping for an answer.

To his surprise, he found the lumber-room empty. He struck a match and examined the place carefully. There were no indications that any one had been in there.

While scraping about he heard the sneeze again. This time it seemed to come from the room he had just quitted. The puzzled look on his face gave way to one of certainly and exultation.

"She's in the closet!" he whispered. "Why didn't I think o' that? It'll open the ole man's eyes purty wide when he finds, as he will in about a minute, that his darter's been spyin' on him. I've suspected the critter fer some time. Somebody's been sneakin' around after me; and who else could it be but her?"

All this time Dolly was in a very agony of terror and distress. That terrible "kch—kch" would come in spite of her. Her eyes were smarting and filled with tears, and her lungs seemed on the point of bursting.

"Whoever it is is in that closet!" said Towsley, as he came back into the room.

"Eh? What? Robbers in the closet?" and Nettleton started up in alarm.

As Towsley fixed his burning eyes on her place of concealment Dolly thought she would surely faint.

"We'll find out purty soon!" Towsley declared, advancing. "If it's robbers we'll make it warm for them."

Convinced of the identity of the person concealed, he did not draw his weapons.

As he swung open the closet door, Dolly gave a wild howl and dashed madly past him, her head and body enveloped in some of the suspended garments that had concealed her.

This movement was not contemplated when Towsley began his advance. The idea was born of her desperate and extreme fright. But it was wonderfully successful. The sudden rush tumbled Towsley in a heap. Nettleton fell back with a moan, as the howling apparition appeared, knocking the lamp from the table and extinguishing it in his fall.

As the light went out, Dolly dropped the lumbering clothing and went down the stairway with a series of terrified bounds. Towsley struggled to his feet with a curse, and drew a revolver. Then, remembering that the fugitive was supposed to be Edith, replaced it in his belt.

He struck another match, picked up the unbroken lamp and relighted it; then assisted the ranch king to his chair.

"What was it?" asked Nettleton, in a hollow whisper, glaring around.

"Hanged if I know!" Towsley replied, grimly. "Ghosts, mebbe!"

Nettleton cowered at the word; and, pouring out a glassful of the brandy, drank it off at one gulp.

CHAPTER IX. A PLOTTING PAIR.

"MATTERS are working nicely!" said Mascot Bill, whipping the hay with his braided quirt. "Right to our hands!"

"Yes, I reckon they air; though I have my doubts, sometimes!"

Ben Towsley shifted in his lazy position and looked up at the foreman.

They were in the big stable, erected for the accommodation of the cow-ponies in bad weather.

"Why?" Mascot Bill queried. "You're getting the whip-hand of the old gent; and I flatter myself that I'm not making slow progress into the affections of the young lady. Primrose is gone and we have free swing of the place; and Midas stands ready to back us at any minute with his money. If the fat falls into the fire now, it seems to me it will be our own fault."

"Looks that way!" Towsley admitted. "But I'm afeard we're bein' spied on!"

Mascot Bill started.

"By whom?"

"I don't suppose you'll b'leeve me, when I tell you. But it's Edith Nettleton."

"Impossible!" cried the astounded foreman. "Why should she?"

"Don't know, 'less she s'picious somethin'! It's a fact, though."

Then Towsley related how he had found Edith in the closet—he still believed it was Edith—and how she had managed to escape.

"But you didn't see her face!"

"No; I didn't need to. But it was her."

"It might have been Dolly."

"I'm shore it wasn't!" with a shake of his shaggy head.

The information staggered the foreman.

"This is serious!" he said, after a moment's thought. "We'll be compelled to use extra precaution from this on. I've half suspected, for several days, that Tony Bowers was also trying the shadow trick. I've caught him in two or three places where he seemed to have no good reason for being. That's why I suggested that the woman you saw was probably Dolly. They might be working along the same line, you know!"

"By the way, what did the old gent think of the apparition?"

"Skeered him nearly to death!" chuckled Towsley. "He more'n half believes yit that 'twas a ghost. Drank a quart o' brandy, nearly, afore he got the kinks out o' his nerves. Of course I didn't say nothin' to him 'bout my s'picious."

"No; it wouldn't have done!"

There was a movement in the hay not far away; and Waxy Joe looked up and rubbed his sleepy eyes. The rustling noise was drowned by the sound of Mascot's pony munching its feed.

Joe had gone to sleep there an hour or so before; and the plotters, on entering, had not noticed him. The sound of their voices had doubtless awakened him.

"The old gent didn't seem to keer 'bout drinkin' any jist afore that," continued Towsley. "Acted like he had half a notion to swear off, which wouldn't 'a' done at all, fer us, you know! After that he drank like a fish. That's the only consolation I kin git out o' the thing."

Waxy Joe rubbed his sleepy eyes again, and gave a great yawn. He was not sufficiently awake to comprehend what the scoundrels were talking about.

The men started and looked at each other.

"There's another spy!" Towsley whispered, as he caught sight of Joe's head above a tuft of hay.

The presence of Joe really ought to have caused them no uneasiness or suspicion. It was a custom of his to tumble into the hay at all times and lay there for hours snoring soundly. They had seen him thus, often, and thought nothing about it. Their guilty consciences, however, conjured specters out of every shadow.

"Hey! What air you doin' hyer?" demanded Towsley, with a savage oath, as he swooped down upon the hapless youth and lifted him bodily to his feet.

"Please, sir, I ain't doin' nothin'!" Joe declared, cowering, and "batting" his eyes like an overgrown owl.

"Don't tell any lies, now! We know better. What was you doin' hyer? Spit it out, er it'll be the wuss fer ye!"

"The spies are thickening, it seems!" said Mascot Bill, coming up, with a terrible scowl on his face. "We'll need to watch the cowboys, next!"

"I reckon we will!" growled Towsley, giving Waxy Joe a terrible shake.

"Now, speak up, youngster! Who was it set you to spyin' on us?"

"Nobody!" howled the unhappy youth. "I ain't been spyin'."

"Yes, you have. An' somebody put you up to it. Now, who was it?"

Joe gave another prolonged howl and reiterated his denial.

"Let me at him!" Mascot requested.

Towsley slipped to one side, but did not relax his grasp of the boy's collar.

"Now, you know me, Joe; and you know I won't stand any foolishness."

He spoke as calmly as a schoolmaster, and drew the heavy, braided quirt through his hands, as he spoke.

"Yes, sir!" Joe sniffled.

"You were coiled upon the hay there, just now!"

"Yes, sir!"

"What did you hear us say?"

"I don't know as I kin recollect. I was asleep."

The threatening calm of Mascot's demeanor frightened him and he fell to sobbing like a child.

"Did you hear anything?"

"I don't know as I did!"

"A likely story!" growled Towsley. "He don't know whether he heered anything er not! He's a-lyin'. I kin see it in his eyes."

Joe trembled; but made no reply to this outburst.

"You went to sleep there, and you waked up without hearing anything. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, sir. So help me, that's so."

"Well, Joe, I'm inclined to believe you. I know you're an honest fellow; and I've always rather liked you."

"Towsley and I were talking about a cattle trade we are thinking of making. There's a good deal of money in it; and if it should get out that we wanted that bunch of cattle, we'd have to pay almost double price for them. We thought, may be, you heard us mention the brand, and that you might repeat what you heard. You wouldn't do that, I suppose?"

Joe was watching the quirt, as it slipped backward and forward through Mascot's palm.

"No, sir."

"That's what I thought. Now, Joe, we'll let you go on certain conditions. You will have to hold up your hand and swear that you never met us here in the stable to-day. And if you break that oath and we hear of it, we'll whip you till the skin peels from your back."

Joe looked again at the heavy quirt, and winced as if he had been struck by it.

"An' air you goin' to let him off that easy?" Towsley asked, in disgust.

"What would you have me do?" Mascot queried. "We might hang him. But I know Joe; and he'll keep a close mouth."

That suggestion of hanging quite broke poor Joe's spirit. He fell upon his knees and begged for his life in a way that would have melted a heart of stone.

"I think we'd better hang him!" cried Towsley, with a grin and a wink.

"Oh! oh! Please don't! Please don't! I won't say nothin'! I won't say a word. Honor bright, I won't!"

"I believe you, Joe!" said Mascot, at last taking pity on the terror-stricken lad. "Now, get up, and repeat after me the oath."

Joe scrambled to his feet, and, in a faltering voice, recited the words after Mascot.

"Now you can go!" cried the latter. "And remember the hanging, if you open your mouth about this business."

Joe sprung through the doorway and vanished with almost miraculous speed.

"Won't he go right straight to the young lady an' tell that?" Towsley asked, in a doubting tone.

"Not he! He'll never mention it. He'll be afraid to now. Then, I doubt if he would, anyway, to her. He thinks I'm her lover and confidant, and he'd be afraid she would tell me of it. Besides, I don't really believe he heard anything. He's honest. Children and fools always speak the truth, you know."

"Well, I hope you're right!" exclaimed Towsley, with a sigh of relief. "I'd begun to think that ever'body on the place was shadder'n' us, likely."

"Not quite that; but we must keep our eyes open. If Edith is really spying, it will give us trouble. I'm quite confident she doesn't suspect me yet. And we must hurry things, before she does. Have you got the old man worked up to a point where it will be safe for you to venture?"

"Yes; I think I have!" Towsley replied, with becoming modesty. "If he don't take a notion to go back on the brandy."

"Then push the matter. As foreman, I'll look after things outside, and try to hold my own with the girl. She is a beauty, Towsley, and I'm almost in love with her. Between us, with the grip we've got, it will be strange if we can't fill our pockets out of this little business."

A mounted cowboy clattered up to the stables, and the plotting pair separated, Mascot walking out toward the corrals and Towsley returning to the house.

CHAPTER X.

A WILL.

THE next evening Mascot Bill came into the house apparently greatly excited.

"I hear the Indians are on another raid!" he said, sinking limply into a chair.

There was no one present to hear the remark except Nettleton and Ben Towsley.

Nettleton sunk back with a gasp; and Towsley sprung to his feet, as if in alarm.

"I was jist tellin' Mr. Nettleton that I feared, frum what I learned yisterday, that the villains was goin' to make us more trouble. What was it you heerd?"

"Simply that they are preparing for a raid. Old Geronimo is getting restless, as he does about every change of the moon."

"But Geronimo has never troubled this section!" protested the ranch king, slightly gaining courage.

"No; but he intends to pay it his respects this time. There can't be any mistake about it, I guess. A scout came into Paradise Gulch a few hours ago, and that's the information he brought. They are preparing to give him a warm reception. But if he comes he will strike quickly and be off again, before they can get turned around. That's always been his tactics. He's a shrewd old scoundrel; and a dangerous one."

Nettleton remembered that Mascot Bill had read something to him the evening before that served to corroborate the story. According to this report the wily old Apache was again showing his teeth.

Mascot Bill had assumed Edith's functions as a reader to the old gentleman; and when the newspaper accounts did not suit him or chime in with his purposes he garbled and distorted them in the reading. Occasionally he read things that were not in the paper at all; and this report was one of them.

"What I come for, is to ask what had best be done?"

"Put the place in readiness for defense!" answered the ranch king. "After that we'll have to govern ourselves according to circumstances."

"Maby we'd better light out fer Paradise Gulch!" suggested Towsley, pulling at his beard.

"Never! Every thing I have is here, and I mean to stay here, too, till the end."

Towsley knew what the answer would be when he made the suggestion. Otherwise he would not have ventured it. To have Nettleton go to Paradise Gulch, was the last thing he desired.

"I'll post some of the cowboys out along the edge of the mountains, so we won't be taken completely by surprise if that human devil should come!"

Mascot Bill stalked out as he said it, whipping his boots thoughtfully.

When he had gone, Towsley held his face in his hands for awhile and stared hard at the carpet. At last he looked up.

"I knowed this was comin'." I've felt it in my bones ever since I run across that gang o' Injuns out yonder. An', now, that it's 'most certain, I b'lieve we'd better git ready fer it. If you don't mind, Mr. Nettleton, I'd like to see you fer a few minutes, in yer own room."

Nettleton stared questioningly. Then arose and led the way to that apartment.

When they were seated, with the door closed and bolted, Towsley drew out the brandy bottle and glasses.

"Drink!" he said, filling one and pushing it across to the ranch king. "You look like a ghost. That'll put new life into you; and you'll need it, if Geronimo should come."

Nettleton's face was indeed corpse-like in its pallor. The fear of that raid had quite unmanned him. He knew with what inhuman cruelty Geronimo treated all who fell into his hands; and his imagination had conjured up a horrible vision, as he thought of Edith.

He took the glass, with unsteady fingers, and drained it of its contents.

Towsley promptly refilled it.

"Yes; you'll need all yer stren'th, if wuss comes to wu'st! That Injun is a devil."

"You know what I was talkin' to you 'bout the other day, Mr. Nettleton!" shifting uneasily.

Evidently the memory was not pleasant to the ranch king, for his hand shook and he again drained the glass.

The color came slowly back into his face, and his eyes took on an expression of semi-imbecility.

"Yes!" he faltered. "You were speaking about that little debt."

"An' yer daughter!" Towsley corrected. "Do you know how much that debt amounts to, now?"

Nettleton cowered at the question.

"No!"

"Well, it's above fifty thousan'!"

"Impossible!" drawing back as if a blow had been aimed at him.

"Fifty-two thousan' a hundred an' sixty. That's the exact sum. An' I've got yer notes fer it. So, you see, they can't be any mistake."

"I can't pay it!" Nettleton groaned. "It would ruin me. Why, it's a third o' my fortune."

"I ain't ast you to pay it, yit, have I?" smoothly. "No; an' I ain't a-goin' to! I tol' you that, when we was handlin' the pasteboards. I'm a man o' my word, I am."

He watched the ranch king closely, fearing he

might not prove quite as plastic as he desired. Nettleton was apt to be stubborn on occasion.

"Have another glass o' liquor!" he urged. "It'll stiddy you. That's tip-top stuff, that is! I never tasted better. Midas sent it down t'other day, with word that it was the best truck to be had in Paradise Gulch. A fine man is the colonel, an' a good judge o' liquor!"

Nettleton knew he ought not drink it; but the amount already swallowed had sapped his will-power and robbed him of self-control.

Down the brandy went; and when it took full effect he was as clay in the hands of the modeler.

"That's right! A little liquor puts life into a man. As I was sayin', I'm a man o' my word. I ain't ast you fer that money, an' I ain't a-goin' to, unless—"

He stopped, as if he almost feared to go further, and again studied the face of his victim.

"Unless you refuse to do as I say!"

"What is it you want me to do?" asked Nettleton, putting out his hands.

"I thought I hinted it to you t'other night. Maybe you've forgot, though."

"Yes, I have. My memory isn't good lately, and that cursed brandy seems to make it worse. I've a notion to quit drinking the stuff."

He realized the man's power and in a feeble way was endeavoring to throw it off. For the first time in their acquaintance Towsley's glance struck through him with a chill.

"If the Apaches should come down," Towsley continued, stroking his beard, "it 'ud likely go hard with some o' us. We wouldn't all git away alive. It might be you, you know, an' it might be me, or it might be Edith!"

Nettleton shivered.

"I love that gal as if I was her own father. You can't think more of her than I do. If they do come, I'll defend her with my life."

"I'm much obliged to you, Towsley," the ranch king managed to stammer. "It takes a weight off my mind."

"Yes; an' if you should go under, Nettleton—which may the Lord forbid—I'll be as a father to her."

"In a case o' this kind it's a man's duty to prepare fer the worst. If you're willin'—which I don't see how you kin be otherwise—I'll draw up a piece o' writin' sayin' that much. Not that the writin' would make me do more fer her, but it would give me some authority, you know, if anybody chipped in ag'inst her. I would have a right to stand up fer her, then, you see, ag'inst the world."

"A woman is a helpless critter when she's left alone, without anybody to look after her."

The words were plausible, and the fumes of the brandy were again driving the distrust out of Jacob Nettleton's mind.

Towsley saw his advantage, and, drawing a sheet of foolscap, a bottle of ink and a pen from the drawer, began to scribble with great rapidity. He had evidently studied the form of the instrument he intended to prepare, for he scratched away without halt or hesitation.

"This might be called a will," he explained, looking it over when he had finished it, "but it's hardly that. It gives me the authority to look after Edith's interest, in case of your death, and acknowledges the debt we was speakin' 'bout a while ago."

"I'm obliged to you, Towsley!" Nettleton stammered. "Bliged to you. 'F I should die 'fore you do, you'll be a father to her! That's right, Towsley! That's right. An' you won't ask me for the money? Gimme your han' on that!"

"No; I won't say a word about that money 'long's you live!" extending his hand.

The rascal knew he could not collect a cent of it by legal process.

"I wouldn't cripple your finances by doin' that. When you die, though, of course I'll want it. It'll be sort o' payment, you know, fer lookin' after the girl. I won't say a word about the gamblin'; an' I hain't in this paper. Of course you wouldn't want that to git out."

"Bliged to you!" Nettleton repeated, clutching the chair to keep from falling out of it. "I am 'deed!"

His eyes were rolling idiotically and his utterance was becoming thick.

"In this I've put the amount at fifty thousand dollars, value received. That'll be better an' more ship-shape. I always like round numbers, and by makin' it a matter o' common debt there won't never be anything said about the gamblin'. A debt's a debt, you know, an' it's nobody's bizness, as I kin see, how 'twas contracted."

"No!" Nettleton assented, wagging his head owlily. "Nobody's bizness! Tha's right, Towsley. Tha's right. Nobody's bizness."

"An' now, if you'll sign it, the job'll be done."

He reached for the pen, and then stopped.

"I nearly forgot! We ought to have witnesses. An' another thing, Nettleton. If I was you I wouldn't say anything about this to a livin' soul. Not even to Edith. It will be a mighty pleasure to her to know, when you're gone, that you was so thoughtful of her interests. To know that you pervided so well fer her and got somebody to look out fer her when you couldn't any longer."

"So't will! So't will." Nettleton affirmed, the idiotic stare deepening.

"An' you'll remember that. You won't say a word to her about it?"

The ranch king attempted to nod an assent and lurched heavily forward.

"If I don't hurry up," the schemer whispered, with a start, "he'll be past signin' anything."

He walked to the window, threw it up and from it waved his handkerchief.

Mascot Bill was evidently waiting for the signal. Scarcely a second elapsed before his footsteps were heard on the stairway. He came at once to the room.

"Mr. Nettleton wants you to act as a witness to his signin' this paper."

At the words Nettleton aroused himself, took the extended pen and scrawled his name across the page.

"An' you'll be good to her, Towsley?" he queried, as if a last vague doubt had swept through his befogged mind.

"Same's a father!" declared the villain, emphatically.

"Tha's right, Towsley! Tha's right. I knew you w-would!"

"Now, you'd better git to bed!" lifting him gently. "Seems like that liquor's went to yer brain-pan. Don't see how it could, fer you didn't drink hardly any of it. Sing'lar how a little brandy does knock some men out!"

Mascot Bill took the other arm, and together they got Nettleton between the sheets. In five minutes he was snoring soundly.

"Now jab down yer signature there!" said Towsley. "I'll sign under it. We've got things dead to rights. Fifty thousand certain, an' control o' the girl. Geronimo'll have to make that raid now. Of course he'll strike this ranch, an' the ole man 'll git killed. That paper will then bring me to the front as Ethel's g'ardeen. She ain't of age yet. I'll continue you as foreman, and if we can't pick the place clean in the two years o' my g'ardeenship, it'll be somethin' sing'lar."

Mascot Bill attached his name to the paper, and asked:

"What if she attempts to fight us in the courts?"

"If you can't marry her, we'll have to call on Midas. He's agreed to see us through, if we git into trouble. He'll put up the dust fer a mighty big fight, if we promise a square divvy with him."

Mascot Bill turned away with a satisfied smile, and Towsley, after adding his own name, folded the paper and placed it carefully in an inner pocket.

For a long time he sat there, watching the ranch king in his drunken stupor. Then he went down stairs, and after reporting to Dolly that her master was asleep and did not wish to be disturbed, he strolled out toward the stables.

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER WILL.

THE ranch king did not come out of his drunken slumber until the next morning. His head ached as if it would split, and he had but a feeble recollection of the events of the preceding day.

Edith ran in to see him while he was yet in bed. His appearance, and the peculiar odor told the story that was becoming alarmingly familiar.

"Father, you have been drinking again!" she exclaimed, reproachfully. "You must send Ben Towsley away. He is a scoundrel, or he would not tempt you in this manner!"

The name brought back to him, in a hazy way, the signing of the will and the steps that led to it. In his heart, for the first time, he echoed her charge, and with a groan, he turned his face to the wall.

"I can't!" he wailed. "It is impossible."

"Why is it impossible, father?" she questioned, eagerly. "You have but to give the word. And I declare if you don't pretty soon I will!"

"Don't!" he cried. "It would be the ruin of me."

He would say no more than that, though she urged him again and again.

It was with a heavy heart she descended the stairway. Her father's manner told her that Ben Towsley had acquired over him some mysterious influence or held above him some terrible threat.

There was no one to whom she could turn for advice except Mascot Bill. Mascot Bill had been very kind to her. She believed that he loved her, although he had never told her so. She never once thought of humble Dolly and her lover, Tony Bowers; and if a memory of Prince Primrose crossed her mind she put it away with a sigh.

That evening, while taking her usual walk, she ventured to broach the matter to Mascot Bill.

He started slightly, but managed to conceal his agitation, although a strange look came into his eyes.

"You say you think Towsley is exercising

some undue influence over your father?" he asked, watching her narrowly, without appearing to do so. "In what manner, pray?"

"Oh, I hardly know!" clasping her hands convulsively. "Father is not the same man since he came here. He has taken to drink, and—and I fear to gambling. Towsley has some hold on him, and I have thought it might be a gambling debt. I went to his room this morning. The scent of the brandy was absolutely sickening. Father could scarcely hold his head up; and I saw that he had been drinking again. I have tried to get him to quit and to send Towsley away, but since that man has gained his ascendancy I am losing my influence."

"What is it you want me to do?" he questioned.

"Father puts a great deal of faith in you and I thought perhaps you might induce him to cast Towsley off. If not, that you might speak to the man and get him to quit bringing his brandy and cards here."

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence, you don't know how miserable this knowledge has made me. And I had no one to go to—to but you!"

Her tones were hesitating, and full of pleading.

A sudden wild light leaped into the face of Mascot Bill. In a way he loved this girl. How much he had not known, before! Her appeal touched him. If he could win her for his very own, he thought, he would be willing to sever his relations with Towsley and Midas and fight them to the bitter end. He could obtain the will under some pretext, and, by destroying it, put it out of their power to prove his complicity with them. Then they might rage for all he cared. It would avail them nothing.

He had cultivated Edith's society for no worthy end. Was he about to be burned by the fire he had played with? Was he in love with this handsome, confiding young woman?

The hot blood mounted in an intoxicating wave to his brain. Then came the sudden fear that if he opened his lips she might refuse him. He had, before that night, contemplated the result of such a refusal. But it was with a different feeling. Then, it had angered and irritated him. Now it pained him, more than he dared to confess.

Then the blood receded, and he whitened to the lips.

"Edith!" he said, his voice tremulous in spite of his efforts at control, "I am afraid there is a thorny pathway before you. What the danger is I can't say, even if I had the knowledge. Will you not give me the privilege of traversing that pathway by your side? I have never dared whisper it before. But, Edith, I love you! More than I can tell, and more than I really knew until this minute."

She started back, the warm blood flushing cheek and brow.

"Don't!" she cried. "Oh, I have been wicked. I see it, now. Will you not forgive me for selfishly encouraging you as I have? These walks have been so pleasant and I have been so lonely! But you must forget me, Mr. Lawrence! What you ask can never be!"

"Why not?" he grated, and his harshness startled her. "Am I not as good as the average of mankind? Am I not quite as handsome and intelligent as this Prince Primrose?"

She had never seen him in that mood before. He was diabolically handsome, as he drew himself to his full height.

"It is not that!" shrinkingly. "You are good enough. Far too good, perhaps! And as for Prince Primrose—he is nothing to me. But, really, Mr. Lawrence, what you ask is impossible. I am sorry for this. I don't wish to hurt your feelings; but I must speak the truth!"

She paused, as if lacking the breath and strength to go on.

Mascot Bill dropped her arm, took a turn on the grass, and then faced her.

"You have led me to believe you cared for me!" he said, his words hissing through his teeth. "It was all a pretense. You wished only to pass a few evenings with me that otherwise might have been lonesome and unpleasant!"

"Stop!" she exclaimed. "You misjudge me. It was not my intention to deceive you. Indeed it was not! For a time I honestly and faithfully tried to learn to love you. But I could not."

She did not like his changed manner nor the tones of his voice.

"And you do not care to again attempt it?"

"Indeed I do not. If you force me to answer I will speak plainly. You might flare up as you have just now done, after I became your wife."

Mascot Bill had a quick temper and his anger leaped up, now, like a devouring flame. Discretion was thrown to the winds and the devil within him asserted itself.

"Very well! I would have protected you if you had allowed me to. When the blow falls you must expect to look out for yourself. And it will fall! Ay, and it will grind you and your father into the dust."

He jerked his broad hat over his eyes, and strode from the spot without a backward glance, leaving her to return to the house alone.

Ten minutes later he was walking furiously

up and down by the corral fence, bitterly cursing himself and his uncontrollable temper.

Edith returned to the house with fear and trembling. Mascot Bill's outburst had both surprised and alarmed her. It revealed a depth of malignity that was frightful. It also raised up against him an army of suspicions. She had looked on him with a favorable, if not a loving eye. She could do so no longer. Something like a prayer of thankfulness arose from her heart as she reflected on how closely she had trodden to the dangerous brink.

Henceforth she would be compelled to regard him as a foe. His language had implied that. What could the peril be of which he had so darkly hinted?

No satisfactory answer came to this self-questioning.

Driven by torturing doubt she ascended to her father's room. She had not visited it since the morning, although she had inquired about him frequently. He had expressed a wish that he might remain undisturbed.

There was a marked change for the better when she saw him again. He had left the bed and was sitting in his accustomed place by the table. His face was not so red and swollen and his eyes had regained their natural expression. It pleased her to see him thus.

Ben Towsley was not about, and she closed the door softly, after entering.

There was a feeling of shame-facedness about the ranch king that led him to maintain a stolid silence.

She paid no heed to this. Advancing she knelt at his side and placed an arm around his neck in the old-time way. The barrier of silence melted like ice in the spring-time. The tears came into his eyes, and he placed his hands over his face to hide them. But they trickled through his fingers and fell upon her nut-brown hair.

"What is it, puss?" he asked, at last, controlling his voice with difficulty.

Then she unburdened her heart and confessed everything, with a simplicity that was beautiful and child-like.

Nettleton was but a weak and feeble old man and in many directions pitifully lacked mental strength. Sometimes, though, his mind seemed to shine out with its old-time vigor.

He endeavored to comfort her, and something like peace came to her heart as she knelt there at his side.

"What do you suppose he meant when he spoke of a blow that is likely to fall?"

Then he proceeded to tell her the news regarding Geronimo. Before he had gone very far he let slip a few words that aroused her suspicions. Once aroused they could not be allayed. Deftly, bit by bit, she drew from him the story of the will, and of its attestation by Mascot Bill and Towsley.

Her astonishment was great. And it was mixed with fear. These men were more dangerous by far than she had dreamed.

"They have been guilty of a terrible wrong toward you, father, and you must right it."

It hurt her to think of such a thing as her father's death. She recognized its possibility, however, and with cool deliberation determined to thwart them.

She had no skill in legal forms; but she drew up an instrument that she believed would answer, and submitted it to him. It would do, he said, but objected to signing it, at first, remembering the one that had been so recently executed.

"But you must, father, she insisted. "This gives the property all to me, as I know you want to, and revokes all former wills. The other was obtained by fraud, and this will annul it. As for those scoundrels they need never know this one is in existence."

This last thought pacified him, and he signed the instrument. Then Dolly Dimple and Tony Bowers were called to witness it, being at the same time adjured to secrecy, and the deed was done.

CHAPTER XII.

A RIDE AND A FALL.

Now that this was accomplished Edith felt more at ease. If her father should die and leave her alone, Towsley would be foiled in his attempts to gain control of the Nettleton Ranch. She was convinced that that was his object. She believed, also, that she ought to connect Mascot Bill with the plot. True, he had nothing to do with framing the instrument or getting her father to sign it. But he had attested the signature; and that, added to his words and actions of the evening, condemned him.

All respect for him was swept away. It was as if a veil had been lifted from before her eyes; and she shuddered at the peril revealed to her clearer vision.

When they had left her father again to himself she questioned Tony about the movements of Geronimo.

"It's my opinion, miss, that it's all gammon!" he replied, speaking quite earnestly. "I've talked to cowboys from other ranches an' it's mighty cur'us that none o' them's heerd anything 'bout it. The Apaches hain't never been in this section, an' it's my belief they ain't comin'. It's too resky. If they make a raid they

want to be shore they kin git back ag'in when it's over."

Tony's emphatic statement quieted her fears in one direction, only to raise them in another. Could it be possible that this talk of Geronimo and his savages was a part of the plot against her father and herself? If so, what did it mean? She shuddered at the suggested answer.

After thinking the matter over calmly, she determined to constitute herself her father's guardian. She did not acquaint him with her fears; but every day she took her little, silver-mounted revolver—a present from Prinrose, by the way—and going to the further end of the garden, practiced at target-shooting.

She was already a clever shot and soon became an expert.

"She's a-gittin' ready so't she kin keel you over, if you touch her!" Towsley suggested to Mascot Bill, as the "spang" of the weapon cut the air.

"Curse her! I'll wring her neck if she ever draws that pistol on me!" and Mascot Bill wrinkled his black brows so ferociously that a peeping mouse scudded in hot haste to the very bottom of its hole.

Edith paid no apparent heed to the comings and goings of Mascot Bill. She secluded herself as much as possible from his sight. The long evening walks stopped, and their intimacy became as if it had never been.

Mascot did not seek her out. It was useless to ask her why she avoided him. He knew only too well what the answer would be. The best thing he could do, he decided, was to seem oblivious to the changed condition of affairs.

As for Ben Towsley, he did not appear to be as anxious as formerly to cultivate the good will of the ranch king. He had accomplished his purpose, and felt safe. He never dreamed that a new will might be made. He continued his visits to Nettleton, but they diminished in frequency as the days passed. The ranch king was inclined to be sulky and intractable since that little business transaction had been forced upon him, and Towsley found more enjoyment in strolling about the ranch, over which he hoped to have control at no distant day.

The conferences between Mascot Bill and Towsley were now quite frequent. How frequent no one knew, unless it was the ever-watchful Tony. Still the Apaches did not swoop from their mountain fastnesses like destroying spirits. Perhaps the time was not ripe. Perhaps unforeseen difficulties had arisen and forced a temporary postponement.

Once or twice Edith hinted to her father the advisability of discharging Mascot and of sending away Towsley.

The hints only seemed to make him miserable, however, and she dropped the subject. She wondered why it should be so; and her father did not tell her of the notes-of-hand which Towsley still held against him for those gambling debts. He groaned in spirit when he remembered that he had not even asked for them on signing that first will. Whatever his desires and resolutions, those notes acted as a club to beat them down.

The sudden revelation of Mascot Bill's true character and the consequent severing of their relationship, made Edith almost companionless. There was her father left, of course—not to speak of Dolly and Tony and that human Newfoundland, Waxy Joe, who constantly followed her about as if he were her shadow.

In spite of these, however, the loneliness of her situation grew on her. To dissipate the feeling and give her mind something to feed upon, so that it would not eat itself up, she resumed her old practice of horseback-riding.

The shifting scenery and changing views that this afforded, proved to be the needed panacea. The lowering shadows lifted under the glorious sunshine; and much of the old, joyous feeling, in which existence was of itself a pleasure, came back to her.

She always rode the coal-black stallion which she had conquered after so terrible and perilous a struggle. But he was not a reliable animal, and never would be. To ride him required a firm seat and a tight rein. The wild instinct was still strong within him.

She rather enjoyed his fractiousness, however. A prancing, curveting horse, full of life and fire, was the kind of animal she liked.

Waxy Joe, in all these rides, thundered after her on a faithful and reliable cow-pony. Sometimes he would be at her side. Then again, with an impulsive dash, she would leave him far in the rear.

These rides were extended, day by day, until there was scarcely a cow trail in the country, or a bush or hill, that she had not visited and inspected.

All the time she kept a sharp watch for that dreaded Geronimo; although believing, with Tony, that it was a got-up scare, and he would never come.

Something of her real fears she had whispered to that intelligent cowboy; and he had promised to keep his eyes wide open in her interest and that of her father.

Two or three times she visited Paradise Gulch. But she never encountered Prince Primrose. Once she saw his name on a swinging

sign-board, in front of a little shop, and passed down another street.

It was while riding in the mountainous country back of Paradise Gulch that she met with the accident I am about to describe. An accident that, in its effects, was far-reaching.

The fiery stallion was, with much dangerous prancing, making his way along a narrow ledge, overlooking a deep and dark ravine. The scenery was of the wildest description, and it was quite evident that the foot of man had seldom trod that lonely pathway.

Edith was a fearless and daring explorer, and, on seeing the ledge, determined to find out where it went to. It is a disposition that has led many people to fame, and more to death.

When at its narrowest portion a huge cinnamon bear bolted from behind a rock, with a startled "woof," and made off into the depths.

At sight of the bear the stallion became uncontrollable. He reared straight up and attempted to wheel about on that narrow path. It was an impossible feat. The next instant he lost his footing.

Edith realized her peril, and with a little cry, extricated her foot from the stirrup. With a scream that was almost human in its terror and intensity, the beautiful black tried to regain the ledge. Then he fell like a descending meteor.

As he did so Edith sprung from the saddle, clutching wildly at a bush that grew near. She reached it, and its swaying top sustained her. Then with a sickening sense of horror she heard the body of the stallion strike far below, and heard the "boom" of a loosened and plunging boulder.

Her position was one of extreme peril. Only by the exercise of the utmost care could she hope to drag herself up on the ledge. But the bush was stronger than it looked to be. There was not much soil there, but its roots had penetrated the rocky fissures, and clung with great tenacity.

Slowly, inch by inch, with strength waning and hands bleeding, she drew herself up. The bush bent and cracked beneath the strain. The scaly rock along the face of the cliff splintered beneath her feet and shot fragments downward. But she never faltered.

Up, up—until the projecting edge was reached and passed. Then she fell forward on the ledge in a half-fainting condition.

When she had somewhat recovered her strength, she looked back along the trail, wondering why Waxy Joe was not hurrying to her assistance.

"The lazy rascal is loitering somewhere, likely, plucking flowers."

Joe had a great passion for flowers, and never lost an opportunity of gathering them.

But Joe was not plucking flowers. Had she known what he was doing she would have been even more annoyed.

He had, at the distance of half a mile, seen the black stallion fall from the ledge.

Fully convinced that Edith was killed, he had wheeled the little cow-pony, and was now riding, as if for dear life, in the direction of the distant ranch, his eyes rolling wildly, and his face distorted with horror.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EXCITING DISCOVERY.

"I WONDER if that bear is anywhere near?" she thought, starting up in momentary fright. "I suppose that Ebon is killed. He couldn't be alive after that fall. He must have loosened a monstrous boulder in his descent, for after he struck I heard a terrible crash, as if a mountain had toppled over."

She had advanced to the edge of the precipice and looked down. Not a sound came from the gloomy depths. After a time her eyes became accustomed to the darkness; and she saw, far below, the body of the stallion.

The bear had disappeared in a different direction; and her good sense told her that he was ere then far away. He had been startled and scared and would not be apt to linger long in what he doubtless considered a very dangerous vicinity.

"Perhaps he is running yet!" She smiled, and the thought added to her courage.

"I wish I could get down there! Ebon must be dead, and I can't do anything for him. But that saddle and bridle! They were presents and valuable. I wouldn't take anything for them. And Joe don't seem to be coming."

She walked back along the trail in the hope that she might see him and hasten his gait. He was not in sight.

"He's always near when not especially needed!" she exclaimed, petulantly.

Then she returned and again looked down from the dangerous ledge.

A close scrutiny revealed a way by which she could descend without much difficulty. A zig-zag route, with huge boulders for steps and a guard of scrubby bushes to which she might cling should she lose footing.

It began a few yards from her and wound down in a serpentine way until lost from view.

"I know I could get down there!" she asserted, debating the risks pro and con. "I'm as good a climber as Joe, and almost as strong, and suppose if he were here I would have no hesita-

tion about sending him. He don't seem to be coming and I will go myself."

She went forward, and with some hesitation, but without any difficulty, descended to the first step or terrace. Grasping a bush with both hands she swung herself to the next. It was really very easy, she found, when once she had made up her mind to it.

Very slowly and carefully she continued the descent; the path, if it could be called a path, winding here and there and doubling on itself in a very erratic way.

When she was tired with the exertion she sat down on a stone to rest and fanned herself with her bewitching blue bonnet. It was a wild and romantic spot and she quite enjoyed it, except when she thought of the dead stallion or the live bear.

But she saw not a sign of animal life. Some great birds were wheeling in the sky far above and she wondered if they could see the body of the horse in the depths of that dark hole. Then, when refreshed, she continued her slow descent.

Occasionally she loosened a pebble or a boulder; and with a rattle and bound it would go plunging into the darkness.

When about two-thirds of the way down she came to the place whence the great boulder had started whose crashings she had heard. It must have been as large as a house, judging by the hole it had left and the furrow it had plowed. She shuddered as she thought of the peril such a rush might involve her in. There were other boulders above, equally as large and only needing some Titanic blow to hurl them from their pedestals.

When she came to the stallion she found that he was quite dead. Evidently his head had been crushed and his neck had been broken by contact with the boulder that had been loosened—his death thus occurring in mid-air.

He lay in a sort of cleft that had protected him from the pulverizing rush of the boulder. The huge stone had bounded completely over the body, leaving it undisturbed. A ray of sunlight, falling on his jetty coat at that instant, brought out its satiny gloss; and Edith wept, as she looked at him.

But she was not greatly given to sentiment. The loss of the animal pained her; but tears were vain and useless. So, advancing to the body, she proceeded to strip it of its paraphernalia.

She noted with satisfaction that the articles were little injured. The saddle showed a few dents where it had come into contact with the rocks, and the blanket had a slight hole torn it.

But these were unimportant. The silver trappings and the bridle were uninjured.

Having removed the articles she went a little further down to see what destruction had been wrought by the gigantic boulder.

To her surprise she found that a wide pathway had been torn almost through the solid rock. The boulder lay in the bottom of the ravine, or more properly canyon, and around and upon it was piled the mass of debris that had followed in its wake.

As she looked at some of the fragments a strange light came to her eyes. There was a peculiar and familiar look about them. And when she examined the cleft or path the boulder had torn she saw that its sides were composed of the same material.

"It's gold!" she cried, bending forward and clasping her hands excitedly.

She had seen a great deal of the ore in Paradise Gulch, to which place it had been hauled in carts from the mines. It was a bluish-gray, and the boulder had followed through it at right angles, completely opening it up. The seam appeared to be two feet or more in width.

These mountain ranges are, as Edith knew, a perfect net-work of mineral veins. They pierce them in every direction, and vary in width from the thickness of a knife-blade to several feet. Here and there they crop out.

Very few, however, are of much value, else every prospector would soon become a rich man. The really valuable ones are few and far between. The others contain "low-grade ore." That is, the proportion of rock to the amount of gold or silver which it contains is great. So great in many—indeed, in most instances—as not to pay for the working.

Edith believed, however, as soon as she saw it, that this ore was marvelously rich; and she trembled like a leaf from the excitement and exultation caused by its discovery. Thousands of poor prospectors had wandered and delved for years without discovering anything like it.

She scrambled down and subjected it to a minute inspection, which served to convince her that she was right.

With a beating heart she looked closely to discover if the ore was crossed at that point or touched by another vein. At such intersections are generally found the nugget "pockets" that sometimes electrify the mining-camps. It was a greedy and foolish idea, and she realized it as she began the search. Here was wealth enough, in all conscience, to satisfy the most covetous.

If such a cross vein existed it was certainly not at that point she quickly ascertained; and

then returned to gloat over the wonderful richness of her find.

Paradise Gulch was said to be in a silver mining country, and it was supported mainly by that branch of industry. But there were some paying gold mines in those mountains. None of them, Edith believed, could come up to this, in richness of yield, if properly worked. The only drawback was that it appeared to be in an almost inaccessible place. It is a habit of mineral deposits to exist in apparently inaccessible places; but to them, once their presence is known, wealth quickly levels up or levels down splendid roadways.

The dead horse, the absent Waxy, the gaudy trappings, all the events of the last hour, were as completely blotted from her mind as though they had never been.

At last she aroused herself as if coming out of a dream.

"Oh, dear, here it's away after noon, and Joe hasn't come yet. I wonder what can keep him! I don't suppose his horse can also have fallen down a cliff."

She looked searchingly along the rocky height above, as if she momentarily expected him to materialize.

"It won't do to leave this without putting up some sort of a claim sign!" she mused. "Some one else might stumble onto it. It's mine, by right of discovery, and I mustn't leave a loop-hole by which it can slip through my fingers!"

She began a hurried search for something on which she could write a claim notice.

"Oh, if I only had a piece of plank!"

But she hadn't, and that was an end of it. One might as reasonably expect to find an iceberg in the middle of Sabara.

For a time she was almost in despair. Finally she thought of her bonnet. It was a blue, quilted affair, with a white lining.

"Just the thing!" she cried, taking it off and critically surveying it. "Why didn't I think of that before? It will do nicely, for it's almost as stiff as cardboard."

She quickly turned it wrong side out, drew an indelible pencil from the pocket of her dress, and on the white lining wrote the following:

"I hereby claim 750 feet north and south from this notice, by fifty feet in width, together with all branch veins of the same. EDITH NETTLETON."

This she read over two or three times, her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining.

"There! I believe that will do. The figures are right, I think, and so is the wording. Now, how am I going to fasten it up, and what shall I fasten it to?"

It was a question that, as an Irishman would say, required a deal of nice consideration.

However, after a few minutes' search she found a forked stick that she believed would answer the purpose admirably.

Planting this stick in the center of the vein, she heaped a pile of boulders about it to hold it upright, and to the fork bound the bonnet by means of its own strings.

She had written the words in a large, sprawling hand; and was pleased to see, on stepping back, that they could be read at quite a distance.

This finished to her satisfaction, she slipped into her pocket two or three of the ore lumps that had been torn from the vein; and then climbed again to where she had left the saddle and bridle.

She had now been in the canyon quite a long time, and the temptation was strong upon her to leave these articles. But the fear that wild animals might tear and destroy them decided her against this course.

It was a wearisome task to drag that saddle up the tortuous path. But she set about it bravely and finally accomplished it.

How she would ever reach home with it she did not know. Probably, if Joe did not put in an appearance, she would be compelled to abandon it after all.

She wondered where he could be. Then she called to him; and, getting no answer, continued her way along the ledge toward Paradise Gulch, carrying the saddle.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT.

WAXY JOE, as he rode furiously down the mountain trail, was almost paralyzed with grief and horror.

"Oh, she's killed!" he howled. "She's killed." And he closed his eyes to shut out the memory of that awful fall.

But that only served to make the vision more distinct.

A doubt as to the correctness of his conclusion never crossed his mind. He was sure Edith had gone down with the black stallion and that her mangled body was lying at the bottom of the canyon.

He would not have ventured into its depths for a fortune, believing as he did that the search would reveal her sightless eyes staring heavenward. The thought sent cold shivers creeping along his spine, and brought another series of howls from him.

Mercilessly he spurred on the little pony;

and, when the open country was gained, headed it straight for the ranch buildings.

When he reached them the pony was white with foam, and, nearly exhausted, Waxy could scarcely sit in his saddle. His face was contorted, his eyes rolled and his words were almost an idiotic babble.

Mascot Bill and Tony Bowers were the first to see him coming.

The latter started and turned pale.

"What in thunder kin be the matter with Waxy?" he gasped. "An' where's Edith?"

Mascot was no less astonished.

"We'll soon see!" he replied. "She must have met with some accident and the boy has come after help!"

They hurried out to meet him. The pony had turned of its own accord toward the stables.

At the same time Dolly came running from the house, her head bare and her sleeves tucked above her dimpled elbows.

"Whatever kin be matter?" she demanded, her face showing the alarm she felt.

"Oh, Miss Dolly!" Waxy Joe exclaimed, grasping the pony's mane for support, while the tears streamed from his eyes. "Miss Edith! Miss Edith!"

He wiped his eyes, and twisted his head around in the direction from whence he had come.

"Oh, it's awful!"

Then he straightened up and gave a prolonged howl, as he saw the ranch king approaching, at his best gait.

From the window of his room Nettleton had seen the young man ride up and knew that something out of the common had occurred.

Now, as he advanced, his white hair flying about his face, that was pale and drawn, he looked almost ghost-like.

"Can't you talk?" Dolly cried, grasping Joe's leg and giving it an angry pull. "What's the matter? What's happened?"

She did not know that the ranch king was just behind her.

She turned, as she heard his footsteps, then tried to motion Waxy into silence. But it was too late.

"Oh! Oh! She's killed! - She's dead!" cried the unhappy youth. "She's fell off the rocks and was smashed to pieces! Her an' the stallion!"

A pathetic, heart-broken cry followed the announcement. Mr. Nettleton, as the cry escaped him, threw up his hands and fell forward, limp and motionless.

Waxy Joe gave a scream; and, slipping from the pony's back, fled cowering into the stables.

Tony stared, shocked and bewildered; but Dolly leaped forward, crouched on the hard ground, and drew Mr. Nettleton's head into her lap.

"Run an' git some water!" she shouted. And Tony darted away in obedience to the command.

Mascot Bill stooped and turned the ranch king over, so that he might rest more comfortably. The face, framed in its white hair, was pinched and pallid; the eyes were glassy and staring.

"He's dead!" said Mascot, feeling for the pulse. "We can't do anything for him."

Tony hurried up with a bucket of water.

"Maby he's only fainted!" Dolly urged, dashing a handful of the water into the white face.

Then she commenced to chafe and rub at the limp hands and arms.

Tony assisted her; and together they put forth every effort and exhausted every remedy that suggested itself.

Mascot Bill stood by, a dark look on his handsome face. Perhaps he was thinking that now the raid of Geronimo would be unnecessary.

"Tain't no use!" Tony declared, stopping in his exertions. "He's dead!"

Dolly uttered a low moan. She felt that Tony was right.

"Might's well carry him into the house!" he continued. "It's all Waxy's fault. That boy ain't got a bit o' sense."

This brought the full force of the calamity afresh to Dolly's mind and she gave way to a wild outburst of grief.

Mascot Bill and Tony lifted the form of the ranch king between them and bore it slowly and solemnly into the house, depositing it on a bed in the largest room below stairs.

When this had been done Tony sat down to watch by it, and Mascot Bill walked out to the stable to interview Waxy Joe.

Joe was hidden in the hay; but when Mascot called to him he came out, halting and cringing like a whipped spaniel.

"Oh! oh!" he sobbed. "Is he dead?"

"Yes, he's dead!" Mascot replied, shortly. "And you killed him."

Joe gave vent to his grief and terror in another wail.

"Perhaps you didn't do it intentionally, Joe; but all the same you killed him. And it will be strange if you escape hanging for it!"

Joe's jaw dropped, and a look of speechless horror came into his face.

"I don't say that you will be!" Mascot continued, with a grim smile. "I'll be a friend to you and stand by you through it, if you'll only

speaking promptly and answer my questions. You know I've got considerable influence, Joe!"

In this sudden fear Joe forgot that he had ever called Mascot Bill a "bloody villain," and crept tremblingly to the latter's knees.

"Yes, yes!" he whimpered, rolling his eyes as if he half-expected to see a rope dangling just above his head. "I'll tell all I know. 'Deed I will!"

"Are you sure that Edith Nettleton is dead? Did you see her after she fell?"

"Not after she fell!" Joe stammered. "I couldn't see her after she fell, 'cause the canyon was dark. But she's dead. I know she is. She couldn't be livin'. I heard the boss strike on the rocks; an' it was awful!"

Joe may have heard the stallion strike; but as he was at a considerable distance from the scene of the accident, it is more probable that what he heard was the crash of the boulder.

He shuddered at the memory and placed his hands over his eyes.

"Where is the canyon? and how deep is it?"

The cool, unruffled voice steadied Joe's nerves. He removed his hands and answered the questions.

Then Mascot subjected him to a rigid examination and forced him to relate in detail all the events of the ride. The main point was not shaken by this. Joe insisted that Edith was dead, and stuck to it.

"Very well, Joe! You have told a straight tale, and if you get into trouble over the affair, I will see that you get out again. I will want you to guide me to that canyon after a bit."

He left the stable, and Joe crawled back into the hay to pass another hour of fear and trembling.

Ben Towsley was somewhere upon the place, Mascot Bill knew, and he proceeded to hunt that individual up. A conference was demanded by the turn of affairs.

He was proceeding to mount a horse for the purpose of going in search of Towsley, when he saw the latter advancing, gun in hand.

"Where have you been?" Mascot questioned.

Then, before Towsley could reply:

"Come over here. A matter of importance."

He slipped from the saddle and Towsley followed him to the rear of the stables.

Great was the latter's surprise when he heard the news.

"What's to be done, now?"

"That's what I want to talk about!" returned Mascot. "Of course we won't need to put that Indian business through, now! The old gent's dead; and there's no possibility of our being accused of killing him. So far, so good. We couldn't have wanted it better. But what about the death of the girl? That will knock your guardianship business."

Towsley winked in a very knowing way.

"Don't let anything bother you, pard! Things couldn't 'a' panned out much better. The will gives me fifty thousand; and you see I didn't turn over the notes. They'll give us fifty thousand more. That's the biggest end o' the fortune. If we can't git away with what's left after the court expenses is paid you kin call me a no-count sheep-herder!"

It was a clear statement; and Mascot Bill felt very much relieved, as he walked back to the house.

CHAPTER XV.

MASCOT BILL'S DISAPPOINTMENT.

TONY was still keeping his lonely vigil; and Dolly, in the depths of the kitchen, was wailing out her disconsolate grief.

"This is a sad affair!" observed Mascot, in a lugubrious tone, as he approached the bed whereon lay the body of the ranch king.

"Yes, sir; it air!"

Tony detested the dandified foreman, and was miserly of his words when in his presence.

"I suppose we had better send one of the boys to town for a parson. I'm going after the remains of the young lady in a few minutes. I have thought it would probably be best to have the funeral to-morrow!"

Tony made no reply, but simply looked out of the open door at the rolling plains.

"Curse the fellow!" Mascot muttered, under his breath. "I'd like to have him assume some of the responsibility of the thing."

Then aloud:

"It's no use keeping him a great while, you know! Still, we want to show due respect, and I thought it would be the proper thing to have a parson. Probably you know of one in Paradise Gulch that you can recommend. If so, I'll have the messenger hunt him up!"

Tony had never troubled himself much about parsons, in Paradise Gulch or elsewhere.

"Don't know any of 'em!" he replied, with a shake of his head.

"The fellow don't like me, that's plain!" Mascot Bill muttered, when he was again in the open air. "But I have known that for some time. In fact, ever since I tried to dismiss him. Well, he can't find anything crooked about this affair; and he'll travel mighty lively when its over."

A cowboy had come in during his visit to the house; and him he gave orders to ride to Paradise Gulch for a parson.

"And you can tell Colonel Midas and any other of Nettleton's friends you can think of! Likely they'll want to come out."

Then he passed on into the stable where Waxy Joe was still cowering.

"Now, Joe, I want you to take me to the canyon into which the young lady fell. Put your saddle on a fresh horse and step around lively. It's getting late, and dark will catch us."

Joe gave a howl and covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, I can't!" he moaned. "Indeed, I can't! I'll die!"

For answer, Mascot pulled him out of the hay and gave him a brutal kick. His appearance was distressing in the extreme. He was pale and hollow-eyed, and there were traces of tears on his face. And, now, he cowered and shook like a whipped dog. It was quite evident that he was desperately afraid of Mascot.

"Why can't you?" Mascot demanded. "You're the only one that knows the way."

"I can't! I can't!" Waxy howled in craven fear.

Mascot gave him a look of contempt.

"I'll get Jim Long to go with us, if you're afraid of me. Now where is the place?"

Thus reassured, the youth again described the canyon and the trail that led to it. Then Mascot called Long and told him to get ready to accompany them.

Long was known to be favorable to the Nettleton interests, and Mascot was not unwilling to have such a man witness the finding of the body. Then no perilous question could ever arise in reference to the manner of her death.

By the time Waxy and the cowboy were in readiness, Mascot Bill had brought up a pair of extra horses, a roll of strong sheeting and a bundle of rope.

"Thought it would be best to sling a stretcher between two ponies and bring the body in on that."

"Yes, sir," Long assented, and rode along at his side, while Waxy followed humbly in the rear.

Mascot Bill's thoughts were of a somewhat triumphant nature during that long ride. His scheming and plotting were, he believed, about to be crowned with success.

But these pleasant thoughts were destined to be rudely interrupted.

As they were riding along a poorly-defined trail near the edge of the mountains, the barrels of a couple of Winchesters were thrust over a rock and an ugly, ill-natured voice growled:

"Stop thar an' throw up yer hands, er we'll plug ye!"

Waxy Joe howled in fright and almost tumbled from his saddle. Mascot and Long paled slightly, and their hands crept toward their holsters.

"Drap that, now!" yelled the voice. "Drap 'em er we'll bore a hole plum through ye. We mean bizness every time, we do; an' ain't a-goin' to stand no monkeyin'!"

"What do you want?" Mascot asked, sullenly, withdrawing his hands. "The trails are free in this country. By what authority do you order me to halt?"

"Stow yer argiment and slide off'n that hoss!"

The command was accompanied by a brutal oath.

Seeing that further parley was useless and might endanger their lives, Mascot and Long obeyed the order, holding their hands high above their heads.

Waxy Joe had already descended and was standing like a carved image, with expanded fingers pointing heavenward.

At this one of the guns was withdrawn and a sraggy-bearded, villainous-faced ruffian came out from behind the rock.

"That air's what I calls sens'ble!" he growled, trying to assume a pleasant smile—a feat that was impossible, for a permanent scowl sat on his countenance. "Nicer, a good deal, than ef we'd 'a' hed to made cold carkidges out o' you. My pard back thar's got you kivered an' 'twon't do ye any good to buck. So ye kin purreed to shell out yer vallybles quick's ye know how!"

Mascot Bill understood the situation, now, if he did not before. His rich and flashy attire had attracted the attention of the covetous rascals. It was not the first time that his fine feathers had brought him to grief in the same manner.

Although outwardly cool, he was inwardly raging. It would have given him keen satisfaction to shoot the scoundrels down in their tracks. That menacing rifle-barrel alone held him quiet.

"I haven't anything!" he said, secretly glad that he could, at least, disappoint them in that way. "You'll find us mighty poor plucking. We didn't anticipate the honor or we might have come prepared."

"Left yer pusses to home on the peanny?" grinned the man. "I've hed that story sung to me afore. I've knowed men to lie, though, in my time; an' so I allus makes it a rule to s'arch. Purty clo's ain't allus the 'float' thet leads to a 'pocket' o' nuggets; but it is more often then not!"

He advanced while speaking, and went through Mascot's pockets with a celerity that indicated

long practice. The yield was trifling. A few dollars in silver, a clasp-knife and a pair of gold cuff-buttons, in addition to his arms.

"Blamed ef we ain't struck a dude!" he sung out to his companion behind the rock. "All feathers an' fuzz an' no fillin'. Looks like a Mexican Don an' bain't got hardly 'nuff cash to buy him a dinner. An' the other two is wuss!"

Mascot groaned in spirit. The tone and manner galled him to the quick.

As for Jim Long, he regarded the rascals with smiling eyes. With the exception of his pistols he had nothing whatever to lose.

Waxy Joe's pockets yielded only a valueless mass of trash. There were pebbles and strings, bits of cloth and leather, and a miscellaneous lot of worthless odds and ends.

The man surveyed the yield with a mixture of disgust and astonishment.

"Birds' nests!" he howled. "Blamed ef I kin make anything else out'n it. Not a thing worth kerryin'. We never struck a poorer lay-out."

He picked up Mascot's and Long's weapons and pitched them into the bushes near the rock.

As he did so, the muzzle of the Winchester descended, and his companion scrambled into view. He was even more sinister-looking than the other, if possible, for a livid scar extended across one cheek.

"Now, I suppose you'll allow us to proceed!" Mascot Bill exclaimed, in an exasperated tone. "You've got everything; and we're in a hurry. It's a matter of importance, too! A lady fell from her horse up here in the hills, and we fear she is dead."

The men looked at the spare horses, then at the roll of sheeting and the rope and seemed to think the story possible.

"She'll hev to wait!" declared the spokesman heartlessly. "Nice hosses ye've got thar. Ef we wus on another lay, now, them'd come in handy. But we can't fool with 'em this trip. Kin you tell us whar we kin find the Nettleton ranch?"

Mascot Bill's face took on a look of mystification.

"What do you want to know that for?" he gasped.

The man screwed up one eye and deliberately looked him over.

"Well, you're a cool one, you air! 'Bout the coolest I've struck yit! Why, dod-rot ye, d'ye take me fer a fool? Hows'ever I'll answer ye, jes' fer fun. I'm a-lookin' fer a man that lives roun' thar! Now, whar is it?"

The fellow was standing quite near to Mascot; and, as he asked the question, the latter looked him in the eyes, and made an almost imperceptible motion. The effect was electrical.

"Why, blame it, I'm a fool!" the fellow cried. "You're Mascot Bill, er I miss my guess. The very chap that saved my life onc't over on the Rio Grande. An' hyer I've been a-robbin' ye. Give 'em back the'r things, Bill. This is a chap as helped me when I was in a tight place, an' we won't take nothin' frum nobody that's a friend o' his. Give 'em back the'r guns, an' then we'll talk to Mr. Mascot."

The order was obeyed. Then he walked away, beckoning to his companion, and Mascot Bill followed.

The three came together beyond ear-shot, and then the man questioned:

"Ye say ye'r Mascot Bill? Why didn't ye sling thet out in the fust place? an' we wouldn't 'a' gone through you!"

"I had no idea who you were, of course, or I should have done so!"

Mascot tried to smile, but the memory still stung him.

"You are a little ahead of time, too! So, you see, I had no cause to be looking for you."

"Got tired loafin' roun' out in the mountains!" grinned the rascal. "Thought we'd drop in toward the settlements an' mebbe we c'd do a little work on our own hook whilst you wuz gittin' ready. You're the fust man we've struck, an' I must say thet you're a plum, teetotal fail-yer. Never had anybody pan out wuss."

"I never carry much money with me!" Mascot explained. "I don't think it's advisable."

"No; mebbe 'tain't! Not fer the man thet kerries it. We'll not stop to argy that now. When'll ye be ready fer that raid?"

As the reader has perhaps surmised, these were a brace of scoundrels whom Mascot Bill had summoned to take part in the murderous raid he was planning, and which he proposed to lay at the door of Geronimo's Apaches.

"There will be no raid, now!" was the unexpected reply.

Then he told them of the events of the day and how, in consequence, his plans had changed.

"But I'll see that you don't lose anything. I'll pay you just the same as if the raid had been made. I want you to hang around a few days, within easy call. I don't know that I'll need you, but I may. For the present you'd better go to Paradise Gulch. Report to Colonel Midas and he'll find you a place to stop at and give you money to pay your bills."

"Who's the cusses you've got with you?" jerking his thumb in the direction of Long and Waxy Joe. "The young chap is a rum 'un! kerries his pockets full o' pebbles and strings."

"A sort of natural!" replied Mascot. "Soft on top of the head. But he's a useful fellow, sometimes."

A clatter of hoofs came from the trail. To their great surprise they saw that Waxy Joe had bounded to his pony, and was flying, as if for his life, his every look and motion the very embodiment of fear.

Jim Long was coolly strapping his revolver belt to his waist. He had his own thoughts, doubtless, in regard to the men. As for Waxy, he did not consider the boy of sufficient importance to attempt to stop him.

"Let him go!" said Mascot, coming up smiling. "He's scared to death, nearly, and we know the way anyhow."

The men covered Long with profuse apologies, for the manner in which they had treated him.

"It's all right!" he declared, gruffly. "So long's no harm's done. I didn't like the idee of three givin' in to two. But you had the drop on us."

"Now, if you're ready," turning to Mascot, "I am."

And so they rode away, the rascals apologizing until they were out of sight and hearing.

On gaining the mountains, Mascot took the advance and led the way rapidly along the rugged trail.

Just before sunset, they reached a bend, and there, at the base of a high rock, perched comfortably on her saddle, was Edith Nettleton, alive and well.

Mascot Bill became almost faint at the reaction wrought in his feelings, and smothered a terrible oath in his big, black mustache.

As for Long, he looked as if he was about to tumble from his saddle.

Edith alive and uninjured! For an instant Mascot's anger burned hot against Waxy Joe. But he knew that the boy had only expressed his honest belief when he said she had been killed by a fall. So, concealing his terrible disappointment, he rode forward to greet her.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DESOLATE HOME.

EDITH'S wonder at seeing Mascot Bill and Jim Long there in the mountains was almost equal to theirs at seeing her.

She arose from the saddle and came to meet them.

"I have been looking for Joe," she said. "Ebon fell over a cliff and was killed. I have dragged the saddle this far and can go no further."

"Joe came in, very much frightened, and reported you dead," Mascot managed to stammer. "Your escape must have been miraculous. We certainly never expected to see you alive. He said your horse tumbled into a canyon with you."

"I see, now. Joe thought me killed, and, without investigating, reported it as a fact. That's just like Joe. With the best heart in the world, he's always making blunders, simply because he never stops to think."

She smiled, somewhat sadly and thoughtfully.

"But your father, Miss Edith," Mascot broke in, blunderingly. His mind was in a strange whirl, and he was still hesitating for words.

"What of him?" with a gasp and a start.

Then, as she noticed the singular look on Mascot's face:

"Oh, my God! He isn't ill!"

"Dead!" exclaimed Mascot, with merciless bluntness.

Edith Nettleton became as rigid as stone. The pupils of her eyes dilated, and the look of anguish that filled them haunted Mascot Bill to his dying day. For a moment he half-expected to see her fall dead at the ponies' feet.

Then she recovered with a shudder, and, as the wild look died out of her eyes, whitened to the lips.

"And this was how long ago?"

He started nervously, as one might at the sound of words coming from the lips of a marble statue.

"Four or five hours, at the least, Miss Edith. Joe came in just after noon. He was with us until about an hour ago. We were held up by road-agents on the way, and he was so frightened that he galloped off as soon as they released us."

Jim Long had been unable to find any words with which to express himself, but he looked his pity and commiseration.

"Father dead! Oh, it cannot be true!" she cried.

"It's true," Mascot declared. "It would do you no good to deceive you. And until a little while ago I thought you were dead too."

"I wish I were!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I wish I were! Why did I not die with Ebon in that canyon? Why was I spared for this?"

The calm was passing, and she was becoming wild.

"Don't!" cried Mascot. "Don't go on that way. I can't stand it."

The villain was actually shaking with horror.

"Here! I'll put your saddle on one of these horses, and we'll start home. It's the best thing, and the only thing we can do."

He spurred the ponies forward, anxious to escape from her immediate presence. Her looks and manner almost froze the blood in his veins.

"If she keeps that up she'll go mad!" he whispered, his hands trembling over the saddle he was adjusting. "Her eyes are so dry that they seem on fire."

He tightened the cinches of the wide girths and led the pony back for her to mount.

Jim Long had found his tongue, and, in his rough way, was endeavoring to console her. She believed in Long, and knew that he had a kindly, honest heart. Therefore his efforts were not wholly unavailing.

Dark thoughts stirred in Mascot's mind, and he looked at her strangely as he assisted her to mount.

Edith aroused herself as the ponies started. The movement of riding broke the spell that had enchained her spirit. A realizing sense of her loss swept over her like an engulfing wave, and she gave way to her grief in tears.

The outburst relieved the tense strain on her nerves, and she felt better. She even came to wonder, in a little while, how she could be so calm, with the knowledge that her father was lying at home cold in death. By a merciful provision of nature, the human mind is so constituted that it cannot at once grasp the full depth and breadth of such an affliction. The knowledge comes by degrees, as it can be borne; and thus "the Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb."

Those dark thoughts in the mind of Mascot Bill were taking definite and horrible shape now. It was generally believed that Edith was dead. Why not make that belief a reality? With the exception of himself and Jim Long no one knew that she still lived.

He looked around uneasily, and pulled his wide-rimmed hat over his eyes to hide their glimmer.

"Why not?" he thought. "Nothing could be easier. With Edith out of the way, the path is clear to the Nettleton fortune! Curse her! Why didn't she go over that ledge, as Joe thought?"

"Yes, it can be worked. I can ride ahead, and waylay them. Where those rascals held us up will be the very place. We won't reach it till after dark. Two shots ought to do the work. It won't do to let Long escape. As for the bodies, I can carry her back and tumble her into the canyon alongside of the horse. Joe would never go there or show any one the way. He's too big a coward. If he exhibited an inclination to I could find some way to silence him. And the body would never be found, with the tell-tale bullet-hole, for I would lead the search!"

"As for Long, I can claim that those ruffians, frightened by Joe's escape, shot him and tried to kill me. I got away by hard begging, as I had helped one of them once. But as I didn't know the way to the canyon, I had to return, after a futile search."

He smacked his lips dryly, and his face assumed the look of a fiend.

"Jim!" he exclaimed, finally, without turning his face to address him, "I have some business to attend to in Paradise Gulch. You know the way home, and it will not be necessary for me to accompany you any further. You can take the extra horse, and look after Miss Edith as well as if I were with you. Better keep to the direct trail. The one we came on!"

There was something in the tones that struck a chill to Edith's heart.

"I will take the cut-off to the town, and will be at the ranch almost as soon as you are!"

He touched his hat, and, without venturing to look back, dashed away toward Paradise Gulch.

Edith sat watching him until he was well out of sight. Then she leaned over, touched the cowboy on the arm, and whispered:

"Something tells me, Jim, that he means mischief. Didn't you notice how strange his voice sounded? And he never looked round once while speaking. God forgive me if I judge him wrongfully, but I believe he means to kill us!"

Long gave a slight start and looked along the trail by which Mascot had disappeared.

"Blamed, if that wasn't what I was thinkin' myself, miss! He ain't any too good, in my opinion. And he has big reasons, I calculate, fer wisbin' you out o' the way."

"I hope we are both mistaken, Jim! But isn't there another trail?"

"Yes; there's another'n. But it's furdler an' not nigh so good travelin'. An' I don't like the idee o' runnin' frum the skunk."

"You must, Jim! For my sake. No matter if the trail is rough. I'd rather cross the hills without any trail at all, than to follow this one. Lead on, now, as rapidly as you can push the ponies. We must get ahead of him. Our only safety lies in doing that."

Jim had taken the rein of the led pony, when Mascot relinquished it. He now started on, leading this pony, and Edith followed.

"It's a mile to the new trail!" he explained.

"Then cut across the hills!" she urged. "We may be waylaid on this route before we reach

it. The way is rough, I know, but we can get through, somehow."

Thus admonished Jim turned at an acute angle to the course they were taking, and plunged along, the ponies scrambling through the brush and over the rocks. The way was indeed rough; and their progress was proportionately slow. But at last, to Edith's great relief, they reached the dim trail which they hoped would lead them to safety.

It was a mere bridle-path, winding and twisting in a serpentine way; but it showed evidence of having been traversed before, and no broad, well-built highway, was ever viewed with more thankfulness.

The sun had sunk behind the mountain range and the shadows of night were now gathering fast. The canyons and hollows were patches of the deepest gloom, in whose dark depths a legion of assassins might easily have found concealment.

Edith could not repress a feeling of fear, as they passed some of them. But she took comfort in the belief that the feeling was causeless. If Mascot Bill entertained the murderous desire she attributed to him he was crouching somewhere in the shadows along the other trail.

Nevertheless she continued to urge the cowboy into an increase of speed, believing that Mascot would soon discover her ruse and follow in hot haste. The thought that possibly he might have suspected it already and be hastening to intercept them added to her fears.

This flight and the terrors surrounding it took her thoughts, in a great measure, from the sudden grief that had fallen upon her in the death of her father. In that respect it was a benefit. It aroused her energies and awakened her faculties.

At last the dim trail debouched into the open plains.

The stars were out by this time; and, on the plains, guided by them, a trail was not necessary. So, getting their bearings and directing their course, they swept forward at a brisk canter.

Once Edith imagined she heard the distant thunder of a horse's hoofs and the sound filled her with terror. But, Jim, after listening intently, declared that he heard nothing, and they went on again.

What a welcome sight it was when the lights of the ranch-house arose out of that sea of grass. It seemed to assure their safety.

And then the buildings loomed darkly, and Edith was at home—face to face with her great grief.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DISCOMFITED VILLAIN.

MASCOT BILL did not get in until long after midnight. There was a look of baffled rage on his face when he found that his intended victims had been at home for some hours. But he said nothing. Not even to Ben Towsley did he reveal the dark plot that had so signally failed. Mascot was a man that could keep his own counsel when it pleased him to do so.

Edith, after taking a look at her father's face and kissing the pallid forehead, had gone to her room, to struggle alone with her anguish.

But kind-hearted Dolly came in, after a little, and remained with her through the night.

Edith could not sleep; and all through the long hours, when not talking to Dolly, lay there, thinking of the pale face below-stairs, in its frame of snowy hair.

Everything seemed unnaturally still the next morning. The cowboys came and went noiselessly, slipping about like veritable ghosts in the hazy light.

But the great, round sun arose with all his matchless radiance, flooding the plains and lighting up the mountains; and the birds sang as joyously as if sorrow and death were unknown.

Mascot Bill had assumed charge of the funeral arrangements. He did not come to ask any advice of Edith, and she was glad that he did not. She felt that she could not bear to look on his handsome, cruel face, after the events of the night. Viewed in as favorable a light as possible, the conviction was forced on her irresistibly that he had parted from her the previous evening with foul murder in his heart.

The funeral was fixed for four o'clock—a later hour than usual, but one made necessary by the minister's previous appointments.

Just before dinner Colonel Midas arrived, pompous as ever. A number of friends from Paradise Gulch were with him. He sent up his card, but Edith felt privileged to decline to see him, and did so.

At three the minister put in an appearance; and Edith descended to the lower rooms, leaning on the arm of the faithful and sympathetic Dolly. Her face was almost corpse-like in its pallor, and she trembled violently.

There is no need to describe the ceremonies in detail.

When the clods fell sullenly upon the coffin Edith uttered a wild shriek and fell to the ground senseless.

A consuming fever followed, and for three days she hung between life and death.

Through it all Dolly was a ministering angel, whose touch gave strength and hope. And she

never wearied. There was no task too tiresome and tedious; no watching too long and wearisome.

When Edith came back from the borderland of death it was to find her hand in Dolly's, and the gaze of the faithful creature bent upon her face.

"I have been very sick, Dolly; have I not?" she asked, a faint smile illumining her wan features.

"Yes, dear!" with a soft and soothing touch upon the forehead. "But you will soon be well now."

"How long have I been sick, Dolly?"

"Four days! Five—counting the evenin' o' the—the—"

"The funeral! That's what you mean. You needn't hesitate to speak about it. I am quite strong, now. *That* was with me in all my flighty visions."

"But I would speak of something else! How are affairs going, on the place?"

"Very well!" replied Dolly, averting her face. "Tony's keepin' his eyes open in your intrust!"

She knew they were going far from well; but in the present weakened condition of her mistress she feared to say so.

The answer satisfied Edith; and she turned her head on the pillow and was soon sleeping soundly.

Two days later Dolly recurred to the subject, feeling that Edith ought to know the truth and was now well enough to bear it.

"Towsley didn't want a doctor, dear, when you first got sick. But I would have one, and Tony went for him, without askin' leaf. When he come, o' course they couldn't order him off. It wouldn't look well, you know."

"They?"

"It's Towsley an' Mascot I'm speakin' of. I thought you ought to know 'bout things, so I'm a-goin' to tell you."

Edith nodded, and Dolly went on:

"The next mornin' after you took sick, Towsley come into the house and told us that he was now runnin' the place, an' 'at we'd have to mind him, or git out. Said your pa had left a will 'p'intin' him your guardeen."

"I knowed it wasn't so, 'less there was another will made after that 'un Tony and me signed. But I didn't say nothin', thinkin' it wouldn't be no use, an' fearin' it might do harm."

"Tony says, though, that Towsley's shorely got some kind o' a paper, fer the court's give him 'thority to take charge o' things. An' he's made Mascot Bill his foreman; an' they're jist carryin' things with a high hand. Tony says that they're so high-mighty sence that, he's a'most afeard to open his head."

Dolly, full of her subject, had rattled on without halt or break, giving Edith no opportunity for a word.

"I was afraid of *that*!" said Edith. "I knew of the other will, Dolly, though I never told you. There is another will; but the one you witnessed is later and annuls it. Leave me, now, a little while, Dolly. I must think of some way to meet those rascals."

Dolly obediently left the room, and Edith gave herself to serious and sober thought.

In a little while she called her back, by rapping on the wall.

"Get me that box out of the upper bureau drawer!" she requested, as Dolly again entered.

The box was given her, and from it she extracted the will.

"Now, bring me that little writing-desk."

She lifted herself in the bed, and sat, propped with a pillow.

The desk, a diminutive affair, intended to be used on one's lap, was placed before her, and from it she drew pens, ink and paper.

Spreading out the will on this desk, she proceeded, in a slightly-shaky hand, to copy it entire, even to the signatures.

Then she had Dolly put the original away where it could not be readily got at.

"Now send for Ben Towsley!" when the desk had also been removed.

Towsley came, in answer to Dolly's summons, busting with importance and bravado.

"I understand, Mr. Towsley, that you have assumed charge of the ranch, claiming to be my lawful guardian!" she began, when he stood before her.

"Yes," he replied, not knowing what was coming, and trying to assume a patronizing air.

"Well, then, I beg to inform you that you are resting under a great error. You are *not* my guardian, and never will be."

"I don't see how you're goin' to help yerself!" he exclaimed, with a disagreeable chuckle. "It's a fact, hows'ever much you may think it ain't; and I've got the documents to prove it."

"Your documents are not worth the paper they are written on!" she replied, in so cool a voice that the scoundrel actually colored beneath his tan.

"Hain't, hey? Well, the court at Paradise Gulch seems to think diff'runt."

"No; they are not. The court hasn't seen this yet," and she drew the copy of the will from beneath the bed-coverings.

"This will was made by my father after the

one you hold, and under which you are now claiming to act. I know about that will and I know how it was obtained. And I know *why* you obtained it."

Ben Towsley's face assumed a sickly hue and his hands shook.

"You're a-lyin'!" he grated. "You ain't got any will there."

"No; it isn't here! This is only a copy of it. I'm not such a fool as to place the real will within your reach. But it's a true copy, as you'll discover by and by. You can examine it, if you want to. You will see that it gives all the property to me absolutely and that it's properly witnessed. Tony and Dolly are the witnesses. They saw father sign it with his own hand and will testify to the fact in any court."

Towsley snatched the extended paper and ran his eye hurriedly over it. Then he crumpled it up and put it in his pocket.

"This is a made-up thing," he cried, with a harsh laugh, "an', as your guardeen, I'll take charge of it. It's a bold bluff, my beauty, but it won't win the game."

"I knew you would do that with it!" she exclaimed scornfully. "It is not safe to place valuables in the way of a man who has the instincts of a thief. So, I kept the original out of your way. You can keep that copy if you want to. And I'd advise you to look it over carefully before going any further; for I give you fair warning that I will call you to account for every act!"

He tried to laugh, but the attempt was a dismal failure. In spite of his pretense, he felt that she was telling the truth, and was terribly in earnest in the telling of it.

"A game of bluff!" he repeated. "But it won't win. Even if every word you say is so it won't make much difference to me. I've got yer daddy's notes fer over fifty thousan' dollars; an' I'll collect every cent."

She had feared something of the kind and was prepared for it.

"Gambling debts! The statement don't alarm me. You can't collect them by law. They are only debts of honor and the man who made them is dead. You may as well understand, first as last, that I, as his legal heir, will never pay them. The notes were obtained by the most shameful fraud; and if you know when you are well off you will say nothing more about their collection."

"Now go! And remember what I've said! I'll hold you strictly accountable for every act. Dolly is my witness; and you can no longer shield yourself under a profession of ignorance, even in a court of justice."

"Yes, I'll go!" he snarled, backing through the doorway, his heart boiling with rage and discomfiture. "But I'll make it interestin' fer ye. You needn't think I'm done with ye. I'm yer lawful guardeen; an' you'll find out that I ain't to be put down so easy as ye may think!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

TONY'S DEFIANCE.

"He is a dangerous man!" Edith declared, as Towsley, swearing in a horrible manner, left the room. "I am almost afraid of him! I believe there is no villainy he is not capable of."

"And that air Mascot is as bad!" Dolly asserted.

"Yes; he is."

And then she told Dolly of how she believed Mascot Bill planned to assassinate her and Jim Long.

Dolly listened, in open-mouthed horror.

"Maybe they have killed Joe!" she exclaimed. "Joe ain't been seen since the day of the funeral!"

"He hasn't and you don't know what has become of him?"

Edith was greatly agitated by the statement.

"Tony thinks maybe he's at Paradise Gulch. But I don't! At least not since knowin' what you said. He never was in the habit o' goin' there; an' it's my belief that they've killed him."

Edith covered her face with her hands. That belief was almost her own. She knew Joe's faithfulness. He would not desert her in this time of need.

"He was greatly distressed about father's death; feeling, no doubt, that he was somewhat responsible for it. I suppose he can't have committed suicide?"

She looked up at Dolly, and asked the question in an awed voice.

"Shorely not, Miss Edith. He wouldn't be such a fool as that!"

"Then, Dolly, the shock has driven him crazy and he has wandered away somewhere. Either that, or he is, as you say, dead. Joe wouldn't voluntarily leave me, now; if alive and in his right mind."

"And if they have killed Joe, what is to hinder them from killing me? Not their consciences, for they haven't any. Nothing but a fear of the consequences. Dolly, send for Tony! I want to speak with him about this."

Dolly darted away; and, after a little while, returned—Tony following, holding his cowboy hat in his hand. He sat down, nervously, and reddened to the roots of his hair. This entering a lady's bedchamber—that lady propped up in

bed—was a trying ordeal for the somewhat bashful Tony.

"I suppose Dolly has told you what I want to see you about!" said Edith, plunging at once into her subject to relieve his embarrassment.

"Yes'm!" with an uneasy fidget and a twist at the big, white hat. "It's about them uppish cusses out at the stable."

"Tony!" leaning forward and speaking very earnestly. "I'm afraid of those men. You must watch them by day and night. I'll rely on you to do this. Keep as close about the house as you can during the daytime. And every night, until I'm able to leave here, you must sleep in the room that opens into this, with your revolvers at your side. You will, Tony?"

"You kin bet yer boots I'll do it!" he cried; then collapsed, as he realized that his form of speech was not the best that might have been adopted.

"I knew you would, Tony! I always could rely on *you*—and Dolly. But you must keep your eyes open or they may lead you into a trap. I fear they have made away with Joe."

"When they git the drop on me, miss, 'less my back's turned, they're welcome to. If they's one thing I kin do, it's shoot."

There was no air of bravado in the tones. Tony knew his skill with the revolver; and it was simply a blunt statement of his confidence.

"Yes; you're the pistol king, Tony! And you deserve the title! Your good revolvers between me and danger will be better than walls of stone. But you must be on your guard against treachery. There is no knowing what they may do, when they find you are standing between them and me."

"And there's one other thing, Tony! Find out, if you can, what has become of Waxy Joe. Poor Joe! There never was a more faithful creature. Should any cowboy, whom you can trust, go to town, have him make an investigation there."

Tony promised a strict compliance with her wishes, and left the room, evidently glad to escape from so embarrassing a position.

From that hour he increased his watchfulness of Ben Towsley and Mascot Bill.

Along in the evening Mascot Bill requested him to carry a letter to Colonel Midas, in Paradise Gulch.

At this Tony's suspicions leaped into his breast, full-armed.

"They're goin' to try it to-night," was his excited comment, "and want to git me out o' the way. Now, hanged if I'll go."

Then aloud:

"I've got jist a bu'stin' head-ache, boss, an' you'll have to git one o' the other boys. I couldn't ride that fur to save me; not to-night."

He tried to assume a look of pain, but the attempt was not a marked success.

"That headache must have come on you very suddenly," with a sneer and a glance of distrust. "You'll have to go. Most of the others are new men and I can't trust them. This is a matter of importance."

"I'm sorry, boss! 'Deed I am! But I can't go."

"Why, what's the matter with you, Tony? A headache never kept you back from duty before. There's some other cause. What is it?"

Very few cowboys—and other people may be included, for that matter—like to have their statements discredited, even when speaking untruths. On this point Tony was as touchy as any of his class.

"Then I'm a liar, am I?" he roared, the look of pain displaced by one of anger.

Mascot Bill flushed and dropped his hand with apparent carelessness against the butt of his revolver.

Tony noted it, but made no counter-movement.

"Well, no! I don't want to put it as harshly as that. But you've another reason for not wanting to go. Now, I say you *shall* go; or you'll quit this place immediately. You've been getting bull-headed of late, and I tell you I won't stand it. And besides that, you've been spying on me. I've got eyes in my head, Tony, and I hope you give me credit for not being quite a fool."

Tony's rage and astonishment were so great that, for a moment, he could hardly speak.

"Who's been a-lyin' to you, Mascot Bill?" stammeringly. "I'll be boun' it's that air Ben Towsley. If I was shore of it, I'd down him, even if he does claim to be boss of the ranch."

"I make the charges, Tony! Nobody's been lying to me. I know what I'm talking about, of my own knowledge. You've been spying on me. You say you won't go to Paradise Gulch to-night with this letter. Very well. You don't need to. You can, though, consider yourself discharged. I'll have your money for you inside of ten minutes, and you can leave the ranch. I won't have you here, spying on me, another hour."

"Durned if I will!" howled the cowboy, his revolvers coming out like a flash. "I'm hired by Miss Edith Nettleton, and I ain't a-goin' to leave till she tells me to. You've killed or run off Waxy Joe, but you can't come neither o' them on me. I'm byer, and byer I'll stay."

Tony was worked up to a dangerous pitch, and Mascot Bill knew it. He withdrew his hand from the revolver-butt, knowing that the quick-fingered pistol king would fill him with balls before he could get out the weapon. Besides the charge about Waxy Joe took him aback and aroused his curiosity.

"Come! Come!" he urged. "I don't want a pistol duel. I wouldn't stand any show with you in that. You know it, and that's why you strut like a game-cock as soon as you get your hands on your revolvers. But what do you mean by that about Waxy? He's about the place, isn't he? I haven't noticed him for two or three days; but that's nothing uncommon. He must be in the house with Dolly or Edith!"

"Nary time, he ain't!" growled the cowboy, still gripping his deadly self-cockers. "He's gone; an' I calc'late you know what went with him!"

"Well, I don't! You can think as you please. But I don't!"

"And, now, Tony Bowers, a word with you. You've got the drop on me; and, in consequence, have defied me. The day may come when the tables will be turned. If you're wise you'll clear out of here. If you stay, something may tumble when you least expect it."

He turned abruptly and walked away, leaving Tony filled with uneasy forebodings.

"They's one thing, though!" he muttered, trying to extract some consolation from the unpleasant situation. "I ain't under *him* any longer; 'cause he's discharged me. That gives me a better show to hang 'round the house an' look out for Miss Edith."

Thoughts of pleasant talks with Dolly also floated through his mind—though he mentally excluded those from the enumeration of benefits.

He slowly put back his revolvers and walked toward the house.

"I wonder, now, if he was lyin' 'bout that boy, Joe? Cur'us what's become o' the feller. I've been hyer five year an' in all that time I never knowed him to leave the ranch 'thout tellin' something 'bout it and sayin' where he was goin'. I honestly b'lieve the critter's been made 'way with."

"An' if he's the fu'st one he won't be the last one, if them skunks have their way. But they's one thing shore: I'll start a lead mine beneath their ornery skins, if I see 'em lift a finger! Hanged if I don't!"

Whether Mascot Bill sent another cowboy to carry the letter or not Tony did not know. He spent the remainder of the evening in carefully overhauling and polishing his revolvers; and that night he stretched his bandy legs in the little room adjoining the one occupied by Edith.

For a long time he lay awake, listening with watchful ear to every sound. At last he dropped into a light sleep, his revolvers in easy reach of his hands.

About midnight he was aroused by a startled cry—a cry resembling a shriek. He was wide awake and on his feet instantly.

The shriek came from the direction of the stables, and it was followed by a confused noise, as of men calling or speaking loudly to each other.

Tony was puzzled and rather startled. He did not know what to make of it.

Then he heard Dolly and Edith talking in the other room. The shriek and calls had also awakened them.

Knowing by this that they were safe, without hesitation he leaped down the stairway.

The sounds of men running greeted him as he emerged into the open air. This also came from the direction of the stables, and he hurried out there as fast as he could. No one was to be seen, but, guided by the now distant footsteps, he fired two or three shots, without any apparent effect.

The noise and the shots aroused the cowboys who were bunking in a shedlike structure near by, and they came tumbling out, their hands filled with clothing and weapons, and their mouths with questions.

Tony could throw no light on the mysterious affair, and, after talking the matter over with the cowboys for nearly an hour, he returned to his room.

The young women plied him with eager inquiries, but he could not enlighten them.

"I'd think 'at somebody else had been killed, if anybody else was missin'!" he asserted. "But they ain't. Nobody but Mascot Bill an' Ben Towsley, and o' course they wouldn't go fer to kill themselves."

The conclusion was a safe one, and, after many wild guesses and surmises, the young women once more retired.

As for Tony, he did not close his eyes again that night. The mystery of the thing oppressed him and drove away all desire for sleep.

CHAPTER XIX.

A STARTLING APPEARANCE.

BEN TOWSLEY left the ranch that morning, after Edith exhibited the copy of the last will. He did not get to talk with Mascot Bill before leaving, for the latter was somewhere out on the range.

Towsley was greatly disturbed by the knowledge that had so unexpectedly come to him, and he headed his pony for Paradise Gulch, determined to call on Midas with the copy of the will, and get the money king's opinion and advice.

As it chanced Midas was not in town, and Towsley was forced to return without consulting him.

He did not leave the town until long after dark, and it was well on toward midnight when he arrived at the ranch. Mascot Bill awaited his coming.

"I want to talk to you," he explained, "after you put up your pony!"

He walked with him to the watering-trough, and then back to the stable without saying anything further.

When the pony was comfortably under shelter, and munching its feed, he touched Towsley on the arm, and led the way into the shadow of the structure.

It was a bright night, but clouds occasionally veiled the face of the moon, plunging everything into impenetrable darkness.

"Tony's broke clean over the traces, and become unmanageable!"

With this introduction, he plunged into an account of his altercation with the cowboy and its result.

Towsley listened with attention.

"That's bad; but it's nothin' to the little row I had with the gal this mornin'!"

"Edith?"

"Yes; she's got another will, an' it's later than ourn!"

Mascot Bill expressed his surprise and indignation with a terrible oath.

"Is it genuine?"

"I think it is. I've got a copy. She wouldn't let me see the 'riginal. Said she knowed I'd take it, an' she was right there, fer I would. She hauled out this copy, handed it to me, and then declared she didn't recognize me as her guarden, an' wouldn't have nothin' to do with me."

"What did you do?"

"What could I do? Told her she lied, o' course, and more o' the same sort."

"But she skeered me, an' I lit out for Paradise Gulch to have a talk with Midas. He wasn't there, an' hyer I am, no wiser than if I hadn't gone."

Mascot took the copy of the will, and crept with it into a dark and well-sheltered nook. Then, while Towsley struck matches and held them for him, he read it over carefully by their feeble and flickering light.

"That knocks us, if she has a real will like it. That cursed Tony is one of the witnesses, and his sweetheart is the other!"

"Oh, I haven't any doubt that the thing is just as she says it is!" replied Towsley, throwing down the glowing end of the last match. "I could tell by her eyes that she was in earnest!"

"And so the question resolves itself into: What are we going to do about it?"

"That's it exactly. I thought maybe Midas could help me. I looked fer you afore I went, but you wasn't about."

"We might carry her away, and in some manner account for her disappearance!" Mascot observed, thoughtfully.

The idea was perhaps suggested by his desires. He had once imagined that he loved Edith. That feeling had passed away; but he was still not insensible to the charms of her beauty.

"We would have to get Tony out of the way, though, before we could work the trick. And that would be a dangerous job. Have you any idea where the will is?"

"None! 'Less it's some'eres in her room. That'd be the most likely. But she may have give it to Tony to keep. Er she may have sent it to Primrose er some one else in Paradise Gulch."

"There's where the trouble comes in!" Mascot declared, pulling nervously at his mustache. "If we had that will, the rest would be clear sailing. Without it, we're perfectly at sea."

"Suppose we could succeed in carrying her off and the person who has the will—taking it for granted that some one has it—goes and probates it. A legal fight would follow, and Tony and Dolly would come in and prove its genuineness. That would knock our fat in the fire at one blow—and the fact of our holding the young lady wouldn't avail us anything. It would injure us should such a suspicion arise."

"Well, hang it! We've got to do *some*thin'!" Towsley snarled. "We've got to git holt o' the will. It's too resky an' altogether too big a job to kill all o' 'em."

"Yes, it is! And probably if we did, it wouldn't do us any good. The signatures could likely be proven. There is no doubt, I think, that Nettleton's could; and that would settle it. I'm not a lawyer and can't say what the result would be if the girl was dead. But the property would, in all probability, descend to the nearest of kin; and not to us!"

"We must git holt o' the will!" Towsley repeated. "It's our only show. I'm a-countin' some on that fifty thousan', but we want it all. Fifty thousan's a good pile, but it ain't by no

means certain. An' even if it was, a hundred thousan' is a heap better."

He rolled these big sums over his tongue as if they were sweet morsels.

"Have you a plan?" Mascot questioned, impatiently. "Talking won't do it. I agree with you that we must have the will, but how are we to get it?"

Towsley pondered and scratched his head.

"Blamed if I know!" he was forced to acknowledge. "If't wasn't fer that cussid cowboy an' his revolvers we might search the room and the young women themselves. But we can't with him there. Mebbe we kin git yer friends—the ones that held ye up t'other day—to put him out o' the way fer us."

This gave Mascot Bill an idea, and also recalled the memory of Waxy Joe.

But Towsley declared that he knew nothing about Waxy Joe. He had not seen him since the day of the funeral.

"Strange what's become of the fellow! Tony accused me of putting him out of the way. I don't know why he thinks I'd want to do such a thing."

"Yes; 'tis sing'lar!" Towsley assented; and then relapsed into silence.

Suddenly Mascot Bill caught him by the arm.

"What was that?" he whispered. "I thought I heard footsteps stealing around the stable! I don't suppose horse-thieves would be bold enough to come here?"

Towsley listened anxiously, almost suppressing his breathing.

Again came the sound of those light steps. Pat, pat, pat! With scarcely more noise than the rustling fall of autumn leaves.

"There's somebody moving along the stables. I can't imagine who it can be. Surely not one of the cowboys. Any one bent on an honest errand would not walk that way."

He drew his revolver as he spoke, and softly cocked it.

The moon was plunging heavily through dark masses of clouds, her light rather feeble, as a result, and sometimes wholly obscured.

Ben Towsley imitated Mascot Bill's example; and thus they both stood, breathing heavily and waiting for a continuation of the footsteps.

They came again, in a few seconds, soft and light as before.

Locating the direction, Mascot Bill crept forward, Towsley cautiously crouching in his rear.

When they turned the corner of the stables, the figure of a man was dimly revealed in the uncertain light. They could just make out to discern it and that was all.

The form was walking along by the side of the stables in the direction of the big corral.

"If he's a boss-thief what's he goin' there fer?" whispered Towsley, hoarsely. "Hain't nothin' in the corral to-night."

"He may not know that, though! Let's follow him. He'll be apt to show his hand pretty soon."

Again they hatched forward, following the dimly-defined and shadowy figure.

Then the moon suddenly shook the clouds from her face and poured a flood of light over the plain.

Towsley gave a shriek of horror and fell upon his knees. Even the dark face of the foreman became almost white in its ghastliness and his hand shook so that he could scarcely hold the revolver.

"It's him!" shrieked Towsley, groveling in fear. "It's Nettleton!"

To all appearances, the form revealed by the moonlight was that of Jacob Nettleton, the ranch king. The man who was supposed to be at that moment in his grave, with six feet of earth above him.

It was his form, and—as far as they could see, for his back was partially turned—his face. The same snowy hair clustered about it and fell upon his neck.

Then darkness came again upon the earth and swallowed up the awful form.

As it vanished Towsley leaped to his feet and bounded away; and Mascot Bill, scarcely less panic-stricken, followed swiftly after.

It was this that awakened Tony and brought him on that fruitless quest, from which he returned completely baffled and puzzled.

CHAPTER XX.

TONY'S TRUST.

THE week that followed was one of mental unrest for Edith and her friends. Tony constantly hovered about the house, alert and watchful; and Dolly devoted almost her entire time to her young mistress.

Notwithstanding the anxieties of the week Edith gained so rapidly in strength that, at its close, she was almost as strong as ever. Its sufferings and sorrows, however, left their traces on her fair face and cleft their way deep into her heart.

Towsley and Mascot Bill went and came as they pleased, but they avoided the house and mingled altogether with the cowboys and in the bunk-rooms.

They made no movement, apparently, in any direction. Perhaps the superstitious fears con-

jured up by that mysterious appearance held them in check.

As the days and nights thus slipped by without any hostile demonstration, and as her strength came back, Edith's vigorous courage was restored. She became once more fearless and self-reliant.

Thoughts of that wonderful gold discovery also recurred constantly and she became extremely anxious about it. There was a possibility that the "claim sign" she had erected would be blown away by the wind. Then, some one might stumble on the "find" and hold it, in spite of all she could do. And besides, there seemed nothing to hinder any evil-disposed person from removing her notice and placing one of his own in its stead. She had absolutely no proof by which to sustain her right of discovery, should that be done.

These thoughts troubled and made her restless; and determined her to visit Paradise Gulch as soon as she was able to ride that far.

Finally she concluded to send for Tony and confide the secret to him and advise with him in regard to it.

But when Tony stood within the room, his big, white hat in his hand, she began to question the advisability of that course; and, as an excuse for summoning him, spoke of the will.

"I'm worried about that will, Tony!" with a preliminary stammer and cough. "It's not safe where it is."

"No'm, it ain't," Tony assented. "The house might ketch afire an' up it'd go, likely, along with the other things. The most important things is gin'ally fer got when they's a fire."

"Do you know of a good place where it can be kept without fear of it falling into the hands of Mascot and Towsley?"

"I might keep it in my pocket, miss. They'd never git it out of there, unless they downed me!"

Then, as if an idea had suddenly come to him: "Er it might be kep' in the little cave over in the arroya. There's a little hole there, under the rocks, hid by vines and bushes, where it'd be as safe as it would in most people's Bibles. They'd never look fer it there, because I don't think they know anything 'bout the place. Nearly all of 'em air new men."

"That is a splendid idea, Tony, and you can carry it out to-night."

"And there's one thing more, Tony!" as he turned to go. "I am at a point where I need sound, sensible advice from an experienced man. Oae who understands a little law. I'm going to Paradise Gulch in a day or two, and while there I will want to consult some one. Is there any one there to whom you can recommend me?"

She supposed that he would give her the name of some reliable attorney or business man.

"Well, I don't want to advise where it ain't desirable!" he began, shifting uneasily on his feet. "But you've ast me, an' I hope you won't take any offense at what I say. If I was needin' a man who could be tied to, through thick an' thin, an' who is good an' brave as he is honest, I'd go to Prince Primrose! There ain't his ekal in this country. An' I've seen most of 'em—cowboys, cattlemen, money-sharks an' all. Prince Primrose is a gentleman all the time, an' a mount'n lion when it comes to a fight."

Edith flushed under his earnest gaze.

"You seem to have quite a high opinion of the gentleman!" and she laughed to hide her confusion.

"I have, miss. An' I've got cause to. I know what I'm talkin' 'bout; an' that's my advice, straight an' p'inted: Go to Prince Primrose!"

The words haunted her long after Tony had taken his leave. She knew that the simple-hearted cowboy was right. Primrose was a man that could be trusted.

Yet, a feeling of hesitation came over her when she thought of applying to him for aid and counsel. She had treated him coldly; she had neglected him. She did not know that he loved her; but she realized that he had always accorded to her the greatest respect. And she had repaid this kind consideration by a slighting indifference; and had turned from him to the handsome and dashing scoundrel, Mascot Bill.

Of course she did not know at the time that Mascot was a scoundrel. She had, indeed, thought him quite otherwise. He was, too, such a lively, companionable fellow—and Prince Primrose was so quiet and reserved. It was natural that she should turn from him to Mascot, and be secretly pleased, though somewhat pained also, at the change of foreman.

All these things flitted painfully through her mind, as she sat there, mentally turning over the events of the past two months.

"And he, too, may be as changed as is Mascot Bill!" she thought. "No doubt he left the ranch in anger. He might even treat me rudely."

She realized that the thought wronged Primrose, and instantly recalled it. But she could not quite make up her mind that it would be the proper thing for her to call on him in the event of making that business trip to the town.

She was in this uncertain state when darkness fell, and she again sent for Tony to commit the will into his hands.

It had been in the bureau drawer ever since she placed it there just previous to her interview with Ben Towsley.

"In giving this into your charge, Tony, I am trusting my fortune with you!" she said, impressively, as she drew it from its resting-place. "It shows how much I rely on your good sense and discretion, to say nothing of your courage."

"An' I'll see that it's took proper care of, miss!" he declared, with low earnestness. "I'll die 'fore I let that bit o' paper go out o' my possession—only to hide it. An' it'll never be looked fer in that little cave! You kin rest easy on that!"

He tucked it into a pocket and buttoned his coat tightly over it.

"I know you're true, Tony. I only spoke to remind you of how valuable it is."

He bowed in an awkward way. Then, when his hand was on the door-knob, turned again:

"I'll slip up to the cave after everything's quiet, an' then hurry right back. It won't take me more'n a half an hour. An'—excuse me fer sayin' it ag'in—when ye go to town, don't forget to call on Prince Primrose!"

Then he went out, and clattered heavily down the stairs.

The cave he had spoken of was not much over a half-mile from the ranch-house. But its entrance was so concealed and in such a secluded place, that one might have passed by it hundreds of times without discovering it.

The arroya was deep and rocky, filled with bushes and cacti, making it a very undesirable place. No one went near it when it could be avoided. The very cattle were shy of its black depths.

Tony had discovered the cave by the merest accident, soon after coming to the ranch.

A young cow was stricken down one night and the carcass dragged to the arroya's edge. The tracks left by the destroyer were those of a mountain lion. But it was impossible to follow them into the arroya because of the rocky nature of the soil.

Prince Primrose was then foreman and at his suggestion the carcass was left undisturbed; and that night he and Tony stationed themselves not far away, armed with repeating rifles.

Shortly after midnight the mountain lion returned, creeping stealthily out of the shadows. The light was not of the best and it was impossible to obtain a good shot. Yet, when the lion began to tear at the carcass, they let drive at him.

One ball struck him; and, with a horrible roar and whine, he sprang backward and disappeared in the gloom. They ventured to the arroya's edge; and, although they could see nothing, they could hear the brute whining and growling in the depths.

It was the merest guess-work, but they chanced a number of shots, and the sounds ceased. Then they returned to the house and sensibly went to bed to await the coming of daylight.

About sunrise they returned to find the rocks liberally sprinkled with blood. This made a plain trail; and, with weapons in readiness, they picked their way cautiously into the arroya.

The tell-tale stains led them near the cave and then disappeared. The animal had leaped the intervening distance and passed so swiftly through the air that no crimson drops had fallen.

Primrose would have passed on. But Tony pressed the leafy screen aside, and was greeted by a warning growl.

A shot brought the animal from his hiding-place and another avenged the death of the cow by stretching her slayer lifeless.

Thus the cave was found; and the events connected with its discovery passed in detail through Tony's mind as he awaited the hour when he should visit it.

Shortly after eleven he made a careful survey of the premises, passing entirely around the house, and then started on his errand.

Little idea had he that every movement was watched; or that a pair of villains had for an hour been debating whether to kill him where he sat or wait till he went to sleep.

"He's a-goin' away!" whispered one, clutching the other excitedly by the arm. "That air's what I calls luck. That'll leave the coast clear; an', to tell the truth, I ruther hated to tackle him."

All ignorant of this, Tony went on, thinking of the will reposing snugly in his pocket, and of the cave which was his destination.

But that night he was doomed not to enter it.

When nearing the arroya he heard light footsteps, and halted. The footsteps were coming toward him. He slipped down into the grass, clutching one of his revolvers, and waited the approach of the individual.

When the comer drew near, looming hugely in the uncertain light, Tony fell back with a superstitious shiver, and hid his face in the grass.

What he saw was the form of the dead ranch king: the same that had so frightened Towsley and Mascot Bill a week before.

It passed, and, with a howl of fright, Tony

wheeled about and bounded aimlessly away over the prairie.

At the same time, a shot came from the direction of the ranch-house, followed by a clamor of voices and a woman's shriek.

CHAPTER XXI.

A BRIEF CAPTIVITY.

THE men watching Tony with burning, eager eyes, were the ones who had stopped Mascot Bill and his companions on the lonely trail near the mountains.

They had gone to Paradise Gulch, as Mascot instructed them to do, and had lain about the streets for several days, drinking an unlimited quantity of fiery whisky, and getting into endless quarrels.

Then Mascot had sent for them.

He had resolved to have Edith carried away, and then to thoroughly search the ranch-house for the will.

The men were introduced upon the place as cowboys, and thus their presence excited no suspicion.

For several nights they had watched Tony, hoping to catch him napping. His reputation as a pistol-shot made them fear to attack him openly. Great, then, was their joy, when he started for the arroya, leaving the way clear for them to act.

"Now, we'll jes' rake thet young lady in!" said the one who generally acted as leader and spokesman. "The feller's gone galivantin' off some'eres! We don't keer whar. Thet wusn't in the orders. We warn't tol' to foller him, an' I ain't a-goin' outside o' orders. We wouldn't git no extry pay fer the stoppin' of one o' his pistol balls. We come fer the young lady!"

He got up out of the grass, craned his head forward, and listened to Tony's retreating footsteps until they died away in the distance.

Then he advanced cautiously toward the house, his companion following and imitating his movements.

At the outer door they stopped to listen. All was quiet.

"Luck's with us!" chuckled the leader. "They're sleepin' like butflers in high grass!"

He inserted a key into the lock and swung the door open. This admitted them into a wide hall, from which a stairway ran to the rooms above.

The door was left slightly ajar to facilitate their egress and with cat-like tread they climbed the stairs.

"Which room was it the boss said?" questioned the first villain, halting on gaining the second floor.

"Hanged ef I know. Second, seems to me. Ther cowboy okkipies the fust!"

"Yes, thet's so. Second it is!" and he crept along in the gloom, feeling the smooth surface of the walls with his hands.

"Hang it, Tom! Git out yer glim. I'll fall over su'thin' in this cussid place an' sp'ile the hull bizness."

Tom fumbled for an instant beneath his coat and drew out a small bull's-eye lantern. Then he scratched a match softly against his thigh and proceeded to light it.

Aided by the powerful rays of the lantern, the second door was quickly found.

The leader halted in front of it and applied an ear to one of the panels.

"They're in thar," he whispered, "an' sleepin' like tops."

Then he selected a key from the bunch in his hand and cautiously applied it.

"Seems like ol' times, this does, eh, Tom? 'Minds me o' the scrapes we used to have burglin'. 'Fore we turned honest, ye know!"

"Oh, stow thet!" growled Tom. "Ther critters may wake up, an' then we'll have a jolly lay-out. I'd erbout ez soon tackle a painter ez a screechin' woman."

The bolt sprang back with a light click and the door was pushed softly open.

As the men advanced into the room they drew their revolvers, and then turned the far of light full upon the bed.

The two young women were sleeping as peacefully as infants, clasped in each other's arms. Even those brutal men were touched by that glimpse of tranquil innocence.

The light disturbed the sleepers, and they woke with a start, to find themselves looking into the shining tubes of a pair of revolvers.

"No use o' howlin'!" declared the leader, seeing their great terror. "'Twon't do no good. We on'y want one o' you. Thet's Miss Nettleton!"

Edith was cowering and trembling in a very excess of fright.

"Git up!" he commanded, trying to speak soothingly. "We ain't meanin' ye no harm. We'll treat ye tender as a kitten ef you'll go 'long quiet an' keep yer mouth shet."

"What do you want with me?" controlling her voice with an effort.

"We don't want nothin'. We're jes' workin' under orders: ain't we, Tom? Thar's some 'un else, though, thet seems mighty int'rested; an' he's a-puttin' up the ducats fer this job."

"It's kind o' coolish out an' ye'll need some clothes. So I'll turn the light away an' you kin slip into yer duds. No tricks, though, er I'll

flash it back an' you'll have to go jist as you air."

This was more consideration than Edith expected from such men. And when the rays of the bull's-eye lantern were turned from the bed, she slipped out quickly and began to dress.

She knew that resistance was useless and would subject her to insult and indignity. She also had a shrewd idea as to who were the directing spirits of the outrage. These men, if only working out a plan of their own, would have proceeded at once to pillage the house.

"How glad I am that I sent the will away by Tony!" she thought. "And it was done just in time. Though these men may have been watching and taken advantage of his temporary absence. I do hope he may get back in time to thwart them."

"Mascot and Towsley are at the bottom of this affair and they hope to gain possession of the will or some advantage by it."

She had intended to visit Paradise Gulch the next day or the day following, and had prepared a copy of the will which she proposed to file in the court as the basis of a contest. She had thought it not advisable to use the will for that purpose, fearing that it might be stolen or obtained from the archives of the court by bribery of some of the officials. When the case was called it could be produced in evidence.

This was why she confined it to Tony's care. "Well, they will be terribly disappointed when they search the house, for I suppose that is what they mean to do. Maybe they intend to make the surrender of the will the condition of my release."

She shuddered as the possibilities of what captivity might hold in store for her flitted suggestively through her mind.

All this time she was dressing with trembling haste, fearful that the searching light would again be turned upon her.

As for Dolly, in this supreme hour all her usual self-possession and courage deserted her. She cowered, sobbing and quaking, beneath the bed coverings.

"Air ye 'bout ready?" came the gruff question. "M' gittin' in a hurry. Can't fool 'roun' hyer all night, we can't. Not by a blamed sight. If ye ain't ready purty quick, now, I'll turn on the glim an' ye'll have to go anyhow."

Dolly gave a little shriek and sat up, drawing a quilt about her.

Edith quietly slipped the little silver-mounted revolver from beneath her pillow and placed it in the pocket of her dress.

She greatly wished to maneuver for delay in the hope that Tony might return. But she feared to. There was a touch of anger in the man's voice. However, she ventured to ask:

"Where are you going to take me? I'm not very strong and I can't stand a long ride or walk. Perhaps you know that I'm just out of a sick bed."

Her voice quavered—in spite of her efforts at calmness.

Her submissive manner pleased the ruffian and he answered civilly enough:

"It's ag'in' orders to say, miss, whar ye'r goin'. But you needn't be feared that we won't treat you well. Our instructions war p'inted on that. I mout tell ye, eft warn't fer t'other gal. Hows'ever ye'll know soon enough to please ye."

"An', now, ef you're ready, I'll turn on the light! We've got to git out o' hyer's quick ez we kin."

Edith, wondering how she might fight for delay, did not immediately answer, and the man turned the fan of light full upon her.

Dolly uttered a frightened exclamation, and drew the quilt over her head. Then fell again to sobbing. Edith blinked in the strong glare and tried to catch a glimpse of the villainous faces behind it.

Then came that shriek from Tony, swelling across the level like a wail of despair.

"Come!" exclaimed the man, leaping forward and seizing the trembling girl by the hand. "We mus' git! Lead the way, Tom, an' down the fu'st chap that gits in the way."

Tom bounded into the hall, with drawn revolver, and the leader drew the shrinking girl after him, in spite of her efforts at resistance.

At this Dolly gave a hysterical scream and staggered to her feet, still holding the quilt about her.

"Slide!" shouted the leader, hurrying for the stairway. "That she-cat back thar'll raise every soul on the place. Slide! an' don't stop for nobody."

Edith tried to wrench herself loose, hoping that if the cowboys were aroused she might even yet escape. The attempt was met by a wrench that almost pulled her arm from the shoulder and drew her down the stairway with perilous bounds.

On gaining the outer air her captors ran straight away from the house toward the open plains. The light of the bull's-eye had been shut off while they were yet within the hall. Dolly's shriek had aroused the cowboys, but the ruffians easily evaded them; and in a little while came to three ponies, picketed and with bridles and saddles on them.

Edith had been strongly tempted to cry out during that hasty flight. But the threats of the

leader kept her quiet. She also doubted whether it would avail her anything.

The waning moon had just risen out of the eastern plains, it is true, but its light was feeble and greatly obscured by clouds. If her captors were followed the pursuers would have to be guided by sound rather than sight.

"Climb up thar," commanded the leader. "We ain't got no time to wait, an' ef you yell out I'll crack ye over the head with my pistol and take the cons'quences."

Thus adjured she climbed, with his assistance, into the saddle, well pleased to find that it was the one constantly used by her.

She had felt sure all along that these ruffians were from the recent additions to the ranch force, and the saddle furnished indisputable evidence of the fact.

"Straight ahead," said the man, grasping her bridle-rein. "We'll have to make er circle to git roun' them blasted cowboys. I kin hear 'em run an' bawlin' to each other like a lot o' lost sheep. One thing, they can't do much 'thout a leader. An' that's what they won't have unless thet air Tony comes back."

He started the ponies at an easy canter, and bore away so as to widely circle the buildings.

After that first shriek Dolly had been quiet, and Edith shrewdly guessed the truth: the poor girl, overcome by grief and terror, had fallen to the floor in a dead faint.

The hoofs of the ponies made very little noise on the grassy carpet, and it would have required keen ears to follow the abductors by sound.

But the moon, lifting itself higher, began to flood the plains with a mellow light, greatly increasing their danger.

On passing a corner of the great corral, the leader drew in on the ponies, and halted to ascertain if there was any likelihood of pursuit.

At the same moment, almost, the ghostly figure that had so startled Tony only a short time before walked calmly out from the corral fence.

The men recognized the gliding figure instantly, for Towsley and Mascot Bill had spoken to them of the ranch king's mysterious reappearance, and described his manner and looks.

"It's thet ghost!" howled Tom, wrenching his pony around and breaking into panicky flight.

The leader promptly followed him, dropping the rein and allowing his captive to shift for herself.

Edith was not superstitious in the general sense of that term, but that terrible apparition froze her with horror. She gave one glance at the snowy hair, and then almost fell from the saddle.

The pony, of its own accord, wheeled about and raced away after the others, and she clung blindly to its mane, fear-stricken, weak, and almost senseless.

CHAPTER XXII.

PRINCE PRIMROSE.

SHE soon recovered sufficiently to check the pony. Realizing that she was at liberty, she had no wish to fall again into the hands of those terrible men.

"Oh, what can be the meaning of that?" she moaned, looking about in fright and wringing her hands.

The pony had come to a dead halt and was now nibbling at the short crisp grass.

"That *couldn't* have been father; and yet it looked so like him! Can it be possible that that some one is masquerading in that terrible way, for a purpose?"

Her nerves were so unstrung that she could hardly sit erect.

"What ought I to do?" she questioned, aloud, her teeth fairly rattling. "I'm afraid to stay here and I'm afraid to go back to the ranch!"

The sound of her voice set her off in another fit of shivering. The tones were so hoarse and unnatural.

That appearance seemed so awful and unexplainable that she would have been glad to believe she was dreaming, or that it was a mental hallucination or produced by a perturbed vision. But the fright of her captors precluded any such comforting belief.

"It won't do to stay here," she argued. "Those men may come back at any minute. And, even if I was not afraid to, I can't bear the thought of returning home. A second sight of that would drive me mad."

"I wonder how poor Dolly is? But then she is in no danger. No one has any cause to disturb her. And besides Tony must be back there by now; and he is abundantly able to take care of her and himself, too. He will be wild, I expect, when he finds that I have been carried away."

"Perhaps he will attempt to follow me. Maybe it's my duty to go back and inform him that I am free again, and all right. But, no! I can't! I can't!"

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed convulsively.

Then, like a tolling bell, came the words of Tony's admonition:

"Go—to—Prince—Primrose! Go—to—Prince—Primrose!"

A stronger hand than hers seemed on the bridle-rein, and almost involuntarily she turned

the pony's head in the direction of Paradise Gulch.

With eager ears she listened for any sounds of pursuit or for any noises that might come from the direction of the ranch-building. She heard nothing, only the souging of the light wind through the tufts of grass, and the myriad-voiced song of the insect world. Not even a prowling wolf lent his mournful cry to dissipate the oppressive silence.

The hoof-strokes of the pony on the grassy carpet sounded with fearful distinctness, and she imagined she could even hear the beating of her heart. Her nerves were overstrained, and her hearing unnaturally and even painfully acute.

That was a long and lonely ride—the loneliest she had ever taken. And besides, she was weak and almost ill. She had scarcely recovered from her recent prostration, and the excitement of the night had sapped her strength.

When she reached Paradise Gulch she was almost in a fainting condition.

She left the pony at a livery stable and then dragged her weary feet to the nearest hotel.

The sleepy night-clerk looked at her white face in a curious way, but managed to restrain his questions. Then, when she had registered, he led the way to a stuffy and comfortless little room on the second floor.

She noticed his inquisitive glances and was glad to escape without a storm of queries.

It was almost noon when she awoke. The sun was streaming in at the narrow window. With a shudder she recalled the events of the night, and wondered what had occurred at the ranch after her departure.

Her hands shook, as she made her toilet, and when she looked at her face in the little mirror she was surprised to see how drawn and worn it was.

With pardonable vanity, as she thought of Prince Primrose, she endeavored to efface the stains of travel and improve her appearance. But she could not restore the roses to her cheeks without resort to a rouge-pot, and that was something she never did. Then, after arranging her hair becomingly, she went down to breakfast.

Her only table companion was a little, garrulous old man, who talked incessantly of mines and mining-stock, hurling his remarks at her for lack of some one else to hurl them at.

"Are you interested in mining?" he questioned, between his gulps of hot coffee. "I trust you are. This town is dependent on mining; and yet I find so few people who really know anything about it. They'll talk store, store, to you, as if it were the stores that supported the mines instead of the mines the stores. Such ignorance is disgusting! Absolutely disgusting!" and he set the empty cup down with a crash that jarred the table.

It occurred to her that the little old man might tell her something about Prince Primrose.

"Yes!" she replied, studying his face carefully. "It is annoying to have people insist on discussing something else, when one wishes to talk of mining."

"There, you're right, miss!" he cried, lifting the empty coffee-cup absently to his lips and then setting it down again, when he discovered that it was empty. "Quite right! I'm glad to meet so sensible a young woman. These people about here are all fools! Fools!" and he beamed at her pleasantly through his gold-rimmed glasses.

Edith smiled and asked, with child-like innocence:

"I suppose you're acquainted with all the men in the town who are interested in the subject?"

"Quite right, again. Yes, miss; I may say, without ostentation, that I am!" and he pursed up his lips at the agreeable thought.

"Might I—er—ask if you know a gentleman who is generally called Prince Primrose?"

"Primrose? Ay! I know him well. Friend of yours, I presume. Ah, miss, there's a fine man. A *very* fine man. Knows all about mining. Wonderful head. Assayer by profession. Has gone into business for himself lately. Allow me to congratulate you on his acquaintance."

Edith inclined her head in acknowledgment, and flushed slightly.

"I—I haven't met him for some time. So he has gone into business for himself? He must have been working for some one else, then, at the start."

The old gentleman did not notice this confession of strange ignorance.

"Yes; but he had more sense than all the balance of them put together. So he hauled out and put up for himself. And, by Jove, it was a good stroke of business, for he's bound to coin money. Good location; the most improved apparatus and machinery; and I understand he's getting already a full share of the work."

He nodded his head wisely, and again lifted the empty coffee-cup to his lips.

"When you meet him give him my compliments. Smith is my name—Zebulon Smith—and you'll find his office and shop just around the corner, two blocks north, opposite side of the street. Big sign over the door. Reads

something like this: 'Kenneth Primrose, assayer of ores and dealer in mining stocks.' You can't miss it."

Edith smiled and thanked him, and left him calling for another cup of coffee.

She returned to her room and waited till after-dinner business hours before venturing into the street. Then, with much hesitation and inward quaking, she turned her steps toward Primrose's office. Her face was concealed by a veil, for she did not wish any of the friends or spies of her enemies to know of the call.

Primrose was in the rear room when she entered, bending over a furnace and retort. He was in his shirt-sleeves, as she could see through the half-open door.

On hearing her footsteps he donned a light coat and came into the office to meet her.

He did not recognize her until she lifted the heavy veil. Then he whitened perceptibly, but recovered at once and politely requested her to be seated.

"I scarcely expected the honor!" he stammered. "To what kind of circumstance am I indebted for this visit?"

Then nodded, on noticing her weary look and her pallor:

"You are certainly ill, Miss Nettleton! Is there—can I do anything for you? Perhaps I had better send for some stimulant—or a physician!"

"No!" she cried, motioning him back, for he had half arisen. "It is nothing. I am nervous, and not in the best of health. You will not wonder at it when I relate my story."

With this introduction, she plunged into a detailed account of all that had occurred since his departure.

It was a long story, and frequently interrupted by sobs and tears, and by ejaculations of surprise on the part of Primrose. He had not even heard until then of her father's death. There was a little sheet published in the town, which may have contained a mention of it, but he seldom looked at the paper, and no word had been sent him from the ranch.

There was one point, though, that she did not fully elucidate. That was the discovery of gold. She spoke of the fall and death of the horse, of Waxy Joe's fright, and of the death of her father, but not a word about the gold. That was a subject that she wished to touch upon in a fuller manner than was then allowable, and so she postponed its consideration until she had obtained Primrose's opinion on matters of more pressing importance.

The story was concluded by a recital of Tony's advice.

"And you did perfectly right in following it. I will do the best I can for you. But Tony's statements as to my abilities and capabilities must always be taken with a grain of allowance. His regard for me is apt to make him overly enthusiastic."

"There is one point, though, that puzzles me greatly. I refer to the mysterious appearance which you mentioned. Of course, Miss Nettleton, neither you nor I believe in spirits. What then, or rather, who then, was it?"

Edith confessed her complete inability to answer the question, and Primrose gave himself up to a few moments of profound thought.

Suddenly he started.

"You say that Joe is missing! There, in my opinion, is to be found an explanation of the affair. For some reason, now unknown to us, he is personating your father as he was in life. Take my word for it, that is the key to the secret!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN ANCHOR TO WINDWARD.

THE conclusion was one that Edith could scarcely accept, although she had great faith in Primrose's discernment. She knew Joe's peculiarities and idiosyncrasies better than any one else. For years he had been her almost constant attendant, and she had carefully studied his mental characteristics. Joe was intensely superstitious, and for that reason alone, she argued, would be averse to entering upon the role of ghost.

"It may be as you say," she confessed, "though why Joe should wish to do that is more than I can guess. I can't imagine what object he would have."

"Nor I! But Joe is queer, you know! Very queer! And there's no knowing what foolish crotchet may have crept into his brain."

"And, now, with regard to that will! I believe you spoke of a copy. Have you it with you? I'm not much of a lawyer, but I may gain some ideas by looking it over!"

"I haven't, Mr. Primrose!" regretfully. "The copy was placed in the bureau drawer and I had no opportunity last night to get it. But I remember its contents perfectly. Indeed, I have read the original so often that I believe I could make a perfect copy from memory."

"If you will, please!" and he resurrected a pad of paper, and placed it before her, together with pens and ink. "I think you ought to begin a legal fight against those scoundrels. And the sooner the better. They will have less time in which to work out their plans."

He ceased, as her pen began to glide rapidly

over the paper, and sat there calmly watching her.

His thoughts were of the bitter-sweet order. Pleasant and yet painful. The years of his service on the Nettleton Ranch arose before him. And they were years of faithful service! How had they been repaid?

His face darkened at the memory; and his fingers twitched when he thought of the handsome scoundrel, Mascot Bill. Time had brought its revenges; and the woman who had had seen him supplanted without an apparent pang of regret was now seeking his aid in her struggle against the very man who had taken his place.

These thoughts gave way to others; and as he watched the fair, pale face, he longed to take Edith in his arms and shield her from the rough conflict that was before her. He could not do that—although he loved her—but he would, with her consent, champion her interests to the last gasp.

Then, in his work and the distractions of business, he would again seek the lethean draught of forgetfulness, as he had sought it through all those weary weeks.

The pen ceased its movements and he aroused himself, with a sigh.

"You have succeeded, eh?" as she extended the paper toward him.

"Yes; I am almost confident that it is word for word. If there are any errors they are merely verbal and do not at all affect the sense. I drew the will, you know!"

He was looking carefully over the copy.

"That is sufficient to secure you in all your rights. I would file it at once, with the probate judge. If there are any inaccuracies they can be corrected later. Process will then issue and Towsley's bondmen will be held responsible for his acts. If I understand, he is administrator as well as your guardian. It may be that his bondmen are men of no financial standing and that nothing can be collected from them. In that case—and I have heard of the like, where the judge was purchased or prejudiced—you may have trouble."

"Word ought to be sent to Tony, so that he will know where you are and what you propose to do. The information will doubtless relieve him and prevent him from leaving the ranch in search of you, if he has not already done so. I would appoint him foreman or at least confer on him certain powers and urge him to remain at the ranch and look after your interests, as if they were his own."

"Tony is a faithful fellow, and utterly fearless. No better man could be found to hold those rascals in check; for I guarantee they are afraid of him even now."

"How can I get word to him?" Edith questioned.

"If you desire, I will attend to that," he answered, earnestly. "I will also see an attorney for you in regard to this matter of probate."

"I can hardly ask you to do that until I have laid another subject before you," she protested, her gratitude shining in her eyes. "And it is one in which you will no doubt be somewhat interested, for it comes within the province of your especial work."

Then, in a graphic way, she detailed the particulars of her remarkable discovery of gold in that lonely mountain canyon.

Primrose was not only interested by the recital, but excited. There is nothing that so stirs a man's imagination as the cry of "gold."

"Have you the specimens?" he asked, eagerly. Alas! she had not. Like that copy of the will, they were at the ranch.

His face revealed his disappointment. He was eager to verify her opinion of the value of the find.

"They can make nothing out of them, if they do chance to run across them in their search for the will!" with a smile of satisfaction. "In fact, unless they are experienced in such matters, they will pass them by as worthless bits of rock. And, even if they know their value, the discovery will do them no good. It will not lead them to the canyon."

His cheeks were aglow with the thought of that vast wealth lying undisturbed in the canyon's black depths for ages, to be revealed by the accidental fall of a horse.

Then he started:

"Do you think there is any chance that the sign-board, or rather bonnet, can have been blown away?"

"I have thought of that!" she replied, smiling at his eager earnestness. "There is a chance. What if that has occurred?"

"Nothing; unless some one stumbles on the vein. But we must reckon that among the possibilities. There are hundreds of prospectors in the hills and they are bound to come upon it sooner or later. It may already be in other hands. The vein would have been located long ago, if it had not been covered up. Now that it is exposed, every minute adds to the danger!"

He got up and strode anxiously about the room. For a time he seemed to forget that he had no interest in the find.

"And then some thief of a prospector may destroy your claim-sign, even if he finds it in position and all right. He could place his in its stead and you would be absolutely without re-

dress. Of course he could claim to be the first discoverer and you could not prove that he was not. You have no witnesses; and it would be simply your word against his, and his backed by the fact of possession. You would have no show at all. You would lose the claim. There isn't any doubt of it."

He had ceased his restless walking, and now resumed his chair.

"Pardon me for becoming excited!" with a forced laugh. "It is a matter to become excited over. Since I am to be your adviser your interests are my interests!"

Thus, by lugging in his professional self, he attempted to justify his too-evident anxiety. The effort was a failure. Edith saw, for an instant, the storm-tossed spirit, behind the veil of flesh and conventionality. The revelation brought a pang.

"What can be done about it?" she asked, brushing the feeling aside. "The uncertainty will, I fear, give me no rest!"

"The canyon must be visited. The visit ought to be made right away. It is a question as to which is most important, and requires speediest attention, the 'find' or these matters. In my opinion the 'find' is."

"With your consent I will ride out to it yet this afternoon. If your claim sign is down I will put up another for you; and if the claim has been 'jumped' or stolen I will try for its recovery."

"Isn't there anything I can do to aid you? It seems wrong for me to intrude my affairs and drive you from your own work."

"Not at all!" he declared. "Don't mention it. I am only too happy to be of service to—to one I esteem so highly as the daughter of my old employer."

"I will see that you lose nothing by your kindness!" she exclaimed, her voice faltering. "I will pay you well for all your trouble!"

She could have bitten her tongue off for those thoughtless words, a moment after their utterance, for she saw that they went to his heart like knife-stabs. It was almost like offering an insult for her to speak of a money payment to Prince Primrose. Money! When he would have laid down his life for her sake and counted it happiness.

"I beg pardon!" she said. "I—I hardly realized what I was saying. Of course you don't want pay for a work of friendship. I am really so worn out and excited that I oughtn't to be held accountable for what I do say!"

"Think nothing of it then!" he urged, a slight bitterness in his tone; which, however, he tried to conceal. "It is forgotten. Of course I couldn't think of doing this work in expectation of pay. I do it simply in remembrance of the old life and—because I wish to."

He went into the other room and soon returned with a bit of plank and some nails in his hands and the handle of a hammer peeping from a pocket of his coat.

"There is one point we overlooked, Miss Nettleton. And it is an important one, for I intend to start at once for that canyon. You are not of legal age and under the will that has been probated letters of guardianship have been issued to Ben Towsley. Being a minor you cannot legally hold and control this claim and it will fall into his hands. That is, if we don't succeed in removing him by means of the new will."

This was a contingency that Edith had not thought of; but she realized the danger and acted with characteristic promptness.

"Claim it as yours, Mr. Primrose! I give you full authority to do so. Take down my claim sign and put up one in your own name. Then Towsley cannot touch it."

"I had thought of that. Something of the kind is necessary. It's like casting an anchor to windward, you know. It guarantees safety. Still, I don't like to claim the find in my own name."

"You must!" she declared. "It's the only course open."

He knew she was right and offered no further protest; but sat down at the table and printed on the board the formula of a legal claim notice, attaching to it his own name.

Then Edith carefully repeated the directions and routes to be followed in reaching it, and departed, leaving him to perfect his arrangements.

Ten minutes later he was mounted and on his way out of the town.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOLLOWED.

THE light pine board, on which the claim sign was printed, Primrose had wrapped in an old newspaper and now held across his knees. He did not care to attract attention to it by carrying it openly. Paradise Gulch was full of desperate men who would follow him to the "find" and murder him for a far less valuable vein of metal than this was supposed to be.

He took a roundabout way, in leaving the town, going through the unsightly suburbs, so that none of the loungers about the saloons would see him and have their suspicions aroused. That some of them were as shrewd as they were villainous, he well knew, and a glimpse of that mysterious, flat bundle might cause them

to follow him. He would not have taken it, only he knew that such a thing as a bit of plank would be unobtainable after leaving the town. Nevertheless, he was seen and followed.

A trampish-looking man, with a cruel lip and sunken eye rode out of a filthy alley, as Primrose passed it. His coarse, black locks fell upon his shoulders, his face was unshaven and his torn, red shirt, open at the throat, revealed a hairy and massive breast. There was about him a look of animal strength mingled with ferocity, which, added to his generally unwholesome appearance, made him an unpleasant and even repulsive object to the beholder.

He evidently recognized Primrose, and gave him a searching look. But Primrose did not notice it. He did not remember the man, if he had ever seen him before, and passed on, wholly unconscious that he had attracted attention.

"Dollars to cents the feller's struck somethin' rich!" the man whispered, looking wistfully after the vanishing figure. "I know him. He's that air Prince Primrose, the 'sayer, w'ot I heerd the boys chinnin' 'bout. Ef he ain't up to somethin' why's he makin' tracks toward the mountain, et this time o' day. An' I c'u'd see by his face thet he's ez narvous ez a eel. I'll bet thet's a claim notice he's a-kerryin' done up ez keerful ez ef't wuz a lookin'-glass er a marriage s'tificate."

"Anyway I'm a-goin' to foller him. This is a free country, an' I've ez good a right to ride along the road ez he bez. Time ain't worth northin' to me, an' I'd ez soon sleep in the mountains ez elsewhere. So hyer goes!"

He drove the spurs into the sides of the mangy little beast and galloped away after Primrose, who was now well out of the town and jogging toward the mountains at a lively rate over a well-beaten trail.

Primrose was a mile from the town before he noticed that any one was coming along the trail behind him. Then, his suspicions were not aroused. Not until he recognized the pursuer as the man who had ridden out of the alley did he give the matter any thought.

"Can he be following me?" he asked himself, and spurred on, hoping to distance the fellow.

But the mangy pony was fast, and contrived to hold its own fairly well.

At length, rather ashamed of his suspicions and fears, Primrose drew his pony down into a walk. There was no proof that the man was following him at all. He might have intended to take that trail when he rode out of the valley.

The mangy, little brute came on, at a swinging gallop, that soon brought its rider within hailing distance.

"Evenin'!" he exclaimed, as he drew near. "Thought I'd ketch up with ye. Hain't so many fellers travelin' this hyer road ez they might be, an' I didn't know but ye'd enjy comp'ny."

He grinned in a manner meant to be conciliatory and reassuring.

Primrose nodded and gave him a searching glance.

"Got tired o' the ole town back thar an' thought I'd strike 'cross the mountains. Thet town's dead; it is! Deader'n a berrin'! Too quiet to suit me."

He looked at Primrose's pony and then at the mysterious package.

"Whar might you be a-goin', ef the question ain't too p'inted?"

The question was an irritating one, under the circumstances. Primrose feared to indicate any particular mining-camp as his destination, not knowing but the man would announce that he was bound for the same place.

He got out of the predicament, Yankee fashion, by answering the question with another:

"I suppose you're bound for Poker Flats?"

"Yep!" the man answered, leaping to the conclusion that Primrose was going there.

"Well, I'm going over to take a look at the new diggings at Cactus City. I understand there's been some remarkable discoveries there lately."

The scoundrel's jaw fell, and, for an instant, he was silent. In truth, the answer was so unexpected that he knew not what to say. The trail they were following branched like a tree soon after entering the mountains, one of the branches leading to Poker Flats, another to Cactus City and the others to the various mining-camps situated in and beyond the mountains.

"Too bad, thet air!" he at last managed to stammer. "Thought shore 'et I wuz goin' to have comp'ny. Powerful lonesome travelin' by yerself in the mountains. 'Specially of nights. Too plaguey many mount'n lions an' road-agents an' sich to make it comf'ble!"

He smiled in a sickly way to hide his rage and confusion.

Primrose was convinced by the man's actions that he had followed him with no good intentions; and the fellow's discomfiture pleased him.

"Yes, I'm going through to Cactus City to-night. It will take all night, but it's a matter of importance. There's a big lawsuit going on there over the output and yield to the ton of a certain vein and I have been subpoenaed to testify in the case as an expert. I thought, inasmuch as I had to go, I might as well improve

the opportunity and advertise my business. So I had a neat sign printed, which I intend to hang up in some public place. I am an assayer by profession, as you perhaps know!"

He looked at the fellow searchingly as he tapped the board upon his knee.

But experience had made the man wary. He had been trapped once and had no wish to be again.

"No; I didn't know! Thought ez how you looked somethin' like a land-shark; beggin' of your pardon."

They had reached the place where the trail branched. Primrose turned into the one leading toward Cactus City; and with a smile, a bow, and a smoothly-spoken "*adios!*" vanished amid a cloud of dust.

The man reined in his mangy steed, shook his fist angrily at the dust-cloud and proceeded to load the air with a choice assortment of maledictions.

"Ye think 'et you've got away frum me, eh?" he spluttered, when he had regained his breath.

"Well, ye ain't. An' w'ot's more, ye won't. I know w'ot yer sign-board is. Likely story, thet is, thet a feller'd kerry sich a thing clean across the mountains, w'en he c'u'd git one painted jes' as cheap in Cactus City an' save the kerryin'!"

"You've run onto a vein out hyer somewhar an' yer goin' back to post it. Thet's whar yer goin'! Cactus City! Wagh!"

He spat on the ground in disgust; and, still shaking his fist belligerently, turned the little pony into the Cactus City trail.

As for Primrose he rode on, congratulating himself on the clever manner in which he had outwitted the rascal.

Night was now at hand. The sun was already below the range of mountain peaks and the shadows were slowly creeping out of the black depths of the ravines and canyons like prowlers that welcome the coming of darkness.

After advancing about a mile along the Cactus City trail, with an occasional backward glance to assure himself that he was not being again followed, Primrose turned his pony into the hills. Soon after, he dismounted, tied the pony in a clump of bushes and proceeded on foot, carrying the board in his hands.

When he did this, the shaggy-bearded, cruel-lipped pursuer was only a few rods behind.

The Cactus City trail being tortuous and lined with scrub he had been able to follow closely at Primrose's heels without detection. The gathering shadows also aided in concealing his movements.

Seeing Primrose dismount he also hitched his pony and crept along on foot, lithe and cat-like.

Just as the darkness descended, Primrose, to the great joy of the determined pursuer, reached a firm and beaten trail. It stretched along the beetling cliffs, well-defined and easy to be followed.

Like many superstitious men the cruel-lipped individual was a firm believer in luck, and took this to be an omen favorable to his success.

"I'm in good trim to-night fer winnin'," he muttered. "Ef I wuz in Paradise Gulch, now, I'd go right an' bust the fero-bank. The feller's goin' straight to his find, jes' ez I thought. I'll wait till he sticks up his shingle an' cuts out fer home, then I'll put up one o' my own in its place an' camp on it."

His confidence made him incautious, and a shower of falling pebbles sent a warning to Primrose.

Instantly the skulker fell flat on his face in the shadow of a rock and awaited the result.

Primrose halted, listened for awhile, and then went on, thinking that his own feet must have caused the fall.

In a few minutes, however, he halted again, convinced now that the rascal was certainly following. The sound of cautious footsteps had reached him.

But he went on as if satisfied, stepping lightly and more lightly, until his feet seemed scarcely to touch the rock.

Then he crouched behind a big boulder, and with clubbed revolver awaited the cat-like approach of his pursuer.

Nearer and nearer came the muffled footfalls. Then the unshorn face, with its sunken eyes and cruel lips, was thrust around the boulder.

At the same instant Primrose leaped to his feet and aimed a heavy blow at the shaggy head.

The blow was deftly avoided, and with a tremendous shock the men came together.

CHAPTER XXV.

TESTING THE ORE.

A TERRIBLE struggle followed. The men were very evenly matched in strength and agility, but the ruffian had the advantage at the outset. The blow had been delivered with such crushing force that, falling on the empty air, it quite destroyed Primrose's equilibrium.

Seeing his opportunity, the man leaped forward and attempted to crush his assailant to the earth by the fury of the onset.

Primrose dropped the revolver, and, half-rising, gripped him in a bear-like hug, and together they went rolling and crashing over the rocks and among the bushes, until they brought up in a mass of thorny and lacerating cacti.

As it chanced, the ruffian was beneath, and the cactus spines, passing through his thin and torn clothing, entered his flesh with the sting of a million red-hot needles.

A howl came from his lips, and with a muscular flounce he cleared the cacti bed, at the same time loosening Primrose's hold and hurling him backward.

Then, with screams of anguish, the man leaped to his feet and darted away through the bushes.

Glad to be thus easily rid of him, Primrose secured the claim sign and the fallen revolver, and hurried off in the opposite direction. After a little he left the trail, climbed the rugged hillside until he came to a favorable place for concealment, and sat down.

"That was rich!" he muttered, sinking back upon the rocky soil and giving way to a silent burst of laughter. "How the fellow will ever get those needles out of his back without assistance is more than I can guess. He must resemble an animated pin-cushion. Serves him right, too, for sneaking after me in the way he did. The question is, will he return? Judging from my own experience with cactus spines I'd say he won't be able to for an hour or more. But there's no telling. He may have a back like a saddle-skirt!"

For a long time Primrose sat there, without hearing any suspicious sound. Then he crept quietly back to the trail and went on, but all the time filled with a fear that the ruffian was again dogging him.

The trail grew faint and indistinct, and at last seemed to end, for the way was crowded with boulders. Over these he scrambled however, and came finally to the ledge along which Edith had forced the black stallion.

"That girl's got more nerve than most men!" he muttered, looking at the narrow path as it wound around the bluffs in the faint starlight.

"And yet, I don't know whether it ought to be called courage or recklessness. It's a wonder she ever forced the stallion along there. But I believe we are often guided by a Hand stronger than our own; and, thinking of the wonderful and startling changes that have come as the result of that ride, it may have been so in that instance!"

A reverent feeling possessed him, and he removed his hat, and looked questioningly and thoughtfully at the unchanging stars.

With a sigh he turned toward the ledge, and with great care and caution advanced along it.

The starlight was not sufficiently brilliant to render progress safe or easy, and in some places the shadows were very black.

Finally as the way got rougher and more perilous, he crept into a niche, determined to await the rising of the moon.

The wait promised to be a long one, for the moon would not rise until nearly morning. He preferred it, however, to attempting a further advance along the dangerous path. He was, also, close to the place where the stallion fell from the ledge, and if he continued on his way he might miss it altogether. So he crouched in the niche, and with what patience he could command, watched the slow progress of the hours.

After a time he grew sleepy, and stretching his legs across the path so that no one could go by without arousing him, resigned himself to a sort of waking slumber, from which at times he would start, clutching at an imaginary assailant.

Once he dreamed that he was assaulted, and in the conflict they fell to the bottom of the canyon with a crash that was awful. The cause of the dream was simple. In his uneasy shiftings his head had come into contact with the solid rock.

But the feeling of nervous fright with which he awoke, was so strong upon him, that he sturdily resolved to keep awake for the remainder of the night.

And this resolution he stuck to without much difficulty, for the dream had projected so vividly on his imagination all the horrors of such a struggle, and a fall.

At last the laggard moon, thin and wan, crept above the mountains tops; and Primrose began to look for the print described by Edith.

He found it, after much searching, and when the moon had risen higher, descended by the winding and boulder-strewn path into the depths of the canyon.

He feared to await the coming of day, not knowing but that the shaggy-bearded ruffian might be concealed somewhere near and so discover him as he left the place.

When he came upon the body of the black stallion—or rather what remained of it, for it had been torn by vultures and gnawed by wolves—the memory of that wild ride in which the beautiful black had carried Edith so near to death, returned with startling distinctness.

He—Prince Primrose—had saved her life then. Now he was endeavoring to save her fortune. And what, to him, would be the result of it all? Merely a grateful smile and an expression of thanks?

The thought was too bitter to dwell on; and he hastened down to the point where the great

bowlder had plowed through the vein of gold-ore.

The view, even in that dim light, almost threw him into a transport of bewildering and intoxicating pleasure. The vein was certainly of surpassing richness, as he assured himself again and again by passing his fingers carefully over its surface.

And it had not been disturbed! There was the blue bonnet, with the inscription on its white lining, and the ends of its strings waving gently in the breeze. The stick to which it was bound was securely in position, with the bowlders heaped high about its base.

How Primrose longed to shout his joy to the echoing mountains. For a long time he sat there, gloating over the wealth that lay revealed before him.

But the orb of day was following close on the heels of the slender and sickly moon, and the eastern heavens were already heralding his approach, with lily-pale banners.

Realizing this, Primrose aroused himself and looked about for something to which he might attach his claim notice. A scrubby tree grew in a cleft of the rock at one side of the vein, having narrowly escaped the rush of the great bowlder.

"Just the thing!" he commented, unconsciously speaking aloud. "Couldn't have wanted it much better."

Then he advanced to the tree and nailed the board fast to it, quite near to the ground, so that it would escape the notice of any chance passer.

This done, he untied the bonnet and wrapped it in the paper that had been around the board and reverently placed it in an inner pocket of his coat. The stick that had held it aloft was tossed away and the heap of bowlders scattered.

After surveying the work with evident satisfaction, he thrust a number of the ore lumps into the outer pockets of his coat, and climbed back along the tortuous path that led to the ledge above.

Gaining it, he hurried along the trail, anxious to be as far as possible from the place by dawn.

Daylight found him near the point where he had had the conflict with his evil-lipped pursuer. But he looked for him in vain. He was evidently not concealed anywhere near; and, although Primrose surveyed the chaos of shrub and bowlder from a jutting eminence, he discovered no trace of him.

As he went on he began to wonder if, when he reached the clump of bushes, he would not find the pony missing. But it was there, just as he had left it; and when he got a little further down the hillside he came to the mangy beast that the man had ridden, tethered to a bush.

Thinking that something might have happened to the fellow to prevent his return, he released the animal, and it at once fell to nibbling at the scanty grass.

The finding of that pony made him uneasy, however, and during the entire ride to town he could not quite get it out of his mind. It showed that the man was still in the hills! Perhaps the rush into the bushes was a subterfuge to enable him to escape and again dog Primrose's footsteps!

"Great heavens! Maybe he has already replaced my claim sign with one of his own!"

The thought was so uncomfortable that it brought the sweat out in great beads on his forehead.

Paradise Gulch was beginning the duties of the day, when Primrose reached his office. So tired out was he, that when he dropped down on the little bed in the back room, for a few moments' rest, he went soundly to sleep, and did not awaken for hours.

He sprung up with an exclamation and immediately began preparations for testing the ore. A regular assay could be deferred to a later time. What he wanted to determine was about how much gold the rock would yield to the ton, without being particular as to the exact quantity. He believed the ore was rich and wished to verify it in the quickest manner possible.

In a few minutes he had a roaring fire in the furnace. When it had sunk to a bed of white hot coals he took one of the ore lumps, clamped it in a pair of tongs with long handles, and thrust it among the coals.

At the same moment a timid rap sounded on the panels of the outer door.

He hurried to open it and admitted Edith.

"I thought it might be you!" he averred. "I'm glad you came. I have been to the vein; and, if I'm any judge of such matters, it's the richest in this region. It will make your fortune. I brought some of the ore-lumps in and am just getting ready to test one. Come into the back room. It will be a sight worth witnessing."

His face was flushed with eagerness and enthusiasm, as he led the way without giving her time for a reply.

"Ah! It's ready!"

He sprung forward and drew the ore-lump from the furnace. It was literally covered with yellow warts.

Primrose uttered a cry of delight.

"Look at it!" he shouted. "It's the richest

ore ever found in this region. You're rich! Rich! It will run fifteen ounces to the ton."

And he danced about in a very delirium of joy.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BLUE BONNET MINE.

EDITH, quite as well pleased and enthusiastic, was smiling through her tears.

When he could control himself he sat down by her side and told her of the events of the night, and how he had found everything in the canyon just as she left them.

The fact that he was followed gave her great uneasiness.

"I don't think it need cause you any alarm!" reassuringly. "He couldn't know of my visit to the canyon unless he has the eyes of an owl. And if he didn't see me visit it, he is not likely to find the place."

"I will lead a force of men there this afternoon and take possession of the vein by beginning work on it. Then I will bring down a hundred pounds or so of the ore on the back of a burro, and subject it to a regular assay."

"But before turning to that we must look after these other matters. Where have you taken rooms?"

"I haven't taken any yet—regularly!" was the reply. "I didn't know but it might be best to go back to the ranch, after we get these matters arranged."

"By no means! That is just what you must not do. It would be like placing your head in the lion's mouth. Those men tried once to abduct you. They would try again; and perhaps be more successful next time."

"I had better remain just where I am, then?"

"I was thinking—let me see! That is not a very congenial place. Respectable enough and all that; but you will have no company of any kind there."

He leaned his head on his hand and looked thoughtfully at the floor.

"There is a private boarding-house on a quiet back street, a square below the hotel. It would be the very place for you. It is kept by a lady, I think. I would advise you to make inquiries there. I believe the place will suit you."

"As to these other matters I will attend to them. I will write a letter to Tony and send it by special messenger, and see that the copy of the will gets on the records in good shape."

"Then I can turn my attention to the development of the mine. That discovery will create a stir in Paradise Gulch as soon as its value becomes known."

He rattled away, his eyes shining and his homely face so lighted by enthusiasm that it was almost beautiful.

For a time he seemed to forget that in all this he had no part nor lot. But the memory came to him, in all its deep bitterness, when Edith departed; and he bowed his form in despair.

But he did not turn back nor hesitate in the path of duty. The letter to Tony was written and dispatched, and the copy of the will placed in the hands of the best attorney that the town could boast.

"Spare no expense to right this wrong!" were his commands to the man of law. "These fellows have about reached the end of their tether, I think, if we act promptly. They must not only be ousted, but if there is any law that will touch them they must be brought to justice. Push the case and when you need more money call on me and it will be forthcoming."

Thus urged, the lawyer promised to give the matter his immediate attention; and Primrose left the office, feeling free to turn all his energies toward the opening and development of the mine.

As this would require a considerable amount of ready money, he visited a broker for the purpose of negotiating a loan; and there mortgaged his entire worldly possessions in order to obtain it.

"I will be as economical as I can," he told himself, as he deposited the money in a bank, retaining a small sum for immediate expenses. "When the mine is in good shape and yielding well, I will ask her to pay back the amount I have borrowed, with the interest. I know she will insist on something of the sort and that will be fair to all parties. But as to taking pay for my time and labor I will never accept a dollar—not a dollar!"

An hour later he had collected a gang of workmen and was leading them toward the mountains. In front they drove a small train of burros, loaded with provisions, tents and bedding, picks and shovels, camp kettles and cooking utensils, sticks of giant powder, fuses, drills and all the miscellaneous odds and ends that go to make up a mining-camp outfit.

It was impossible to keep the affair a secret when purchasing supplies and organizing such an outfit. But he told no one how rich he believed the vein to be, nor where it was located. And thus, although they left much excitement behind them, not an individual in Paradise Gulch knew their destination, or whether it was one day's journey or ten.

Nevertheless, Primrose knew that hundreds of luckless prospectors would soon flock after them, and that the sides of the canyon and the

adjacent mountain-slopes would be crowded with claim signs.

And it was possible that some of them would "strike it rich." There might be other veins equally valuable in near proximity to the first. Knowing this, he had sacrificed his own rights and chances by erecting the claim sign above Edith's "find" in his own name. But he had made the sacrifice knowingly and cheerfully, not counting the loss when serving the woman he loved, even though that love was not returned.

The mangy pony was gone from the side of the trail, and Primrose rightly conjectured that the shaggy-bearded ruffian had managed to extract the cactus-spines from his back and ridden away, probably in a very disgusted and sulky mood.

The canyon was reached by mid-afternoon, and Primrose at once organized the laborers, appointed a foreman to take charge in his absence, and set them to work.

Some were set to drilling holes in the ore-vein preparatory to blasting, some to removing the bowlders from the path leading to the ledge, and others to erecting the tents and placing the camp in order. It was a very busy and animated scene.

When the richness of the ore-bed was first discovered by the men, it was difficult to keep them from abandoning all work and rushing about over the vicinity to erect claim-signs of their own.

The difficulty was only overcome by Primrose instructing his foreman to erect notices for them. As there was little choice in location, and paying ore was as liable to be found in one place as another, they were at last quieted and returned to work, with visions of immense riches running riot in their minds.

As a matter of fact, however, no other ore-vein of any considerable value was ever discovered near the first. Nature is chary in her gifts!

When this matter was satisfactorily settled, Primrose set off down the canyon, for the purpose of ascertaining if there was not an easier and more convenient way by which it might be reached.

To draw the ore up to the ledge and then transport it over the tortuous and dangerous trail on the backs of burros, would prove costly and greatly diminish the profits of the mine.

He walked for more than a mile down the canyon before finding anything of a promising character. Then it was not just what he wished. The canyon ended in a *cul de sac*; but the walls were not as high there as they were further up. And there was an open place through which he believed a road might be blasted to connect with the trail beyond.

It would be a rather expensive piece of work and the leveling of a road along the bottom of the canyon to the camp would present some difficulties. But he saw that it could be done. Then the ore could be hauled into Paradise Gulch in carts at a great saving of cost and labor.

"I will do it," he thought, "when everything is in running order and the receipts justify the outlay."

Well satisfied with the discovery, he walked back to the camp and found that the first blast was in readiness for firing. The sticks of giant powder were in place and the fuses fixed.

The workmen sought places of safety and the fuses were lighted. A terrible explosion followed shortly, the concussion seeming to shake the very hills. The air was filled with flying stone and a great cloud of dust hovered over the vein.

When it cleared and all danger from falling rocks was over, the men rushed from their places of concealment to see the result. It was eminently satisfactory; and Primrose felt that work was now really begun.

"Men," he cried, mounting the pile of loosened rock and debris, "the blast proves all my expectations to be well founded. I thank you for the earnestness and enthusiasm with which you have entered upon this work. We can call it a mine, now, and it needs christening. I have chosen a name which, however singular you may think it, is strikingly appropriate when the circumstances of its discovery are considered, as I will explain at some future time. So, one and all, three cheers for the Blue Bonnet Mine! Hip-hip-hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The cheers were given with a vehemence and vim truly American; and before they had died away on the breeze the men were busily engaged in sorting the ore.

The camp-fires that night, at the Blue Bonnet Mine, blazed and crackled; and the tired laborers, as they sat in the ruddy glow, joked and told stories and talked of the wonderful vein that had lain so long hidden in the heart of the canyon.

The next morning Primrose started for Paradise Gulch with the burros laden with ore. Leaving the burros standing in the street with the heavy loads upon their backs, he called the owner of a mill into his office and, in his presence, ran a hundred pounds of the ore through a sample-crusher and submitted it to an assay.

The "button" that resulted proved its exceeding richness; and the mill-owner bought the ore

outright at a round figure and agreed to take all of it that Primrose could deliver.

"Well, I'll be able to deliver plenty of it as soon as I get the vein well opened. I am going to sink the pit straight down and I think I will uncover such riches as will astonish Paradise Gulch."

He was elated, as well he might be, and proceeded to the little boarding house where Edith, at his advice, had taken lodgings. There he exhibited the receipts for the ore, told what he had done and discussed, with her, plans for future work.

"And so you named it the Blue Bonnet Mine!" she exclaimed, laughingly. "Trust a man to think of odd titles! But I forgive you. Five men out of every six would have called it the 'Dead Horse Claim.' That you picked a prettier one only goes to prove that you are not a miner."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PUZZLING AFFAIR.

TONY BOWERS, running from the supposed ghost of the ranch king, halted when that cry of distress came from the house.

He was greatly frightened and his honest soul was quaking with superstitious fear; but his supreme sense of duty conquered and he turned resolutely toward the building.

When he reached it, after a sharp run, everything was in the greatest confusion. The house itself was plunged in total darkness, but lights were flashing about the stables and bunk-rooms and the cowboys were shouting and bawling to each other in a questioning and excited way.

"What's the trouble?" demanded Mascot Bill, coming up at the same instant, accompanied by Ben Towsley.

For reply, Tony gave an angry snort and dashed up the stairway, two steps at a time.

No response came to his hurried raps on the door, and he pushed it open unceremoniously, striking a match as he did so. The flickering match revealed the unconscious form of Dolly, prostrate on the floor. It also showed the vacated bed, the tumbled heaps of clothing and the generally disordered state of the room.

Dolly was wrapped in the heavy quilt, just as she was at the time of Edith's abduction.

The match sputtered and went out; and Tony was about to lift the insensible form and bear it down-stairs, when, with a sigh and a groan, Dolly came back to conscious existence.

"So you're alive, thank God!" Tony exclaimed. "I was afeard maby you was dead!"

Dolly, realizing her situation, thanked her good fortune for the sheltering darkness, and with quick wit requested Tony to go for a dipper of water.

Tony departed, with a bound and a leap, encountering Towsley and Mascot in the hall.

It angered him to meet them, for he felt somehow that they were at the bottom of the affair.

"The young lady—Dolly—is all right!" he replied, in answer to their questions. "I don't know where Miss Edith is."

Then, to himself, as he bounded on:

"But I'll bet a yearlin' that you know."

Dolly took advantage of his absence to slip into her garments; and, when he returned with the water, she had the lamp lighted and was pacing hysterically about the room.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Whatever will we do?" she moaned, paying no heed to the dipper of water which he extended. "They carried Miss Edith away. Oh, dear!"

Tony balanced the dipper very deliberately on the wash-stand, to prevent the contents from spilling, and asked who she meant by "they."

Her description was sufficiently accurate to inform him who the men were.

"I've s'picioned 'em ever sence they come. They didn't look like guine cowboys, and I don't b'leve they reely knowed a brandin'-iron from a picket-pin. They're a bad lot, them two, and"—leaning over and whispering the words—"they're in the pay o' Mascot an' Towsley!"

"Now, which way did they go with her? I'll foller 'em an' bring her back, ef't takes a month!"

Dolly could give no information on that point, having fallen in a swoon as Edith was dragged from the room.

But she descended the stairs with him, and aided him in getting ready for the start. Mascot and Towsley, reinforced by the cowboys, plied them with questions.

"I don't know nothin' on'y that the lady's been carried away!" Tony declared, shaking them off. "I'm goin' after her! If any o' you fellers wants to go 'long, git yer hosses!"

There were a few of the old cowboys still on the place and these ran at once for their ponies.

In five minutes they were ready, and following Tony out toward the open plains.

Tony had a theory that the abductors would make for a certain gap in the mountains and for this he shaped his course, stopping occasionally to listen.

They reached the gap long before daylight, and halted to await the slow coming of the dawn. Then, they diligently searched the earth in every direction for some indication that the abductors had passed that way.

Of course nothing of the kind was found.

The scoundrels, driven by intense fright, had ridden straight away across the plains; separating from Edith at a point where the footprints of their ponies were mingled with hundreds of those from the ranch. What became of them was never known, even by Mascot Bill. They disappeared from the country, and the ponies on which they were mounted disappeared with them.

Sick at heart, Tony turned back toward the open country, scattering his men and scrutinizing every foot of the way. But his utmost efforts resulted in nothing, and he was forced to return to the ranch and confess himself beaten.

He was sorely puzzled and distressed by that mysterious appearance of the dead ranch king, but he said nothing about it to the cowboys. On reaching the ranch, however, he told the story to Dolly.

"Do you s'pose it could 'a' been him?" she questioned, horror-stricken.

"Course not! That is, not as he used ter be. Might 'a' been his speerit. I've heerd o' ghosts," deliberately, "but I never much believed in 'em tell now."

That day Tony made further efforts to find some traces of the abductors. Mascot Bill and Towsley, looking as solemn and wise as owls, volunteered all sorts of suggestions and advice, and even accompanied him on one of his searching trips; but nothing resulted.

The worry and excitement almost drove from Tony's mind all thoughts of the will. It was still in his pocket, and when his memory recalled the fact he could not muster the courage to again approach the cave.

The spectral figure, with its waving white hair, had come out of the shadows hovering over the arroyo, and the thought of again meeting it made him shiver.

"I'll jes' keep the will in my pocket," he declared, addressing Dolly. "I ain't got no bizness at that cave, I ain't! I ain't got no bizness anywhere where there's dead men a-walkin' roun'. I ain't afeard, p'tic'larly, of a ghost, but still I ain't a-hankerin' to meet 'em. They look too uncommon creepy."

"I thought at fu'st, after studyin' over it a spell, that maybe Mascot an' Towsley was playin' some kind o' a game, thinkin' likely 't they'll skeer me so't I'd leave the place. But they weren't. One o' the boys tol' me to-day that the same thing 'peared to them t'other night, an' like to frightened 'em to death. The way he knowed it was he overheard Towsley an' Mascot talkin' 'bout it."

"The chap 'et told me is Jim Long, a good feller an' one o' the old hands, an' he wouldn't lie. They didn't know 'et he heerd 'em, he said, an' they was that white an' shaky! Jes' like they was 'bout to drap down in a fit."

"What's the meanin' of it all I can't say. I don't like to give in that they is sich a thing as ghosts, an' yit I can't explain it."

"They's one thing, though, that I've made up my mind to, and he gave his coiled riata a snaky whirl as he said it. "I won't go foolin' roun' where the thing's likely to come, but ef't ever crosses my path ag'in, I'll rope it, er die a-tryin'."

"W'y, Tony?"

Dolly clasped her plump hands and rolled her eyes in frightened amazement.

"I mean it, Dolly," with a dogged shake of the head. "With all that I've heerd tell o' ghosts I don't rec'lect that I ever heerd o' one killin' a person. If't's a reel, sure-enough ghost the rope'll jist go through it, same's 'twould through a shadder. An' if't's a man, down he'll come like a clothes-prop!"

Dolly's horror did not shake Tony in this firm resolve.

"I ain't a goin' 'bout it! But if it comes close to me ag'in, like it did, I'll see whether it's a man er a sperit, if I'm killed fer it the next minute!"

He clutched the riata and stared moodily at the floor, until Dolly, by deft questioning, sent him off on a new theme.

"Where did them men come frum, Tony, that carried Edith away?"

"Do' know! Paradise Gulch, mebbe. Most of the trash comes frum that town."

"I was thinkin' that praps, as they didn't go toward the mountains, that likely they went back where they come frum. If you could find out where that is mebbe you could find Miss Edith."

The thought was a new one.

"I'll find out!" he exclaimed, and hastily left the house.

"Come frum Paradise Gulch to the ranch!" he announced on his return. "That's what Long says. He don't think, though, that they'd been there a great while. That's the idee he got frum a talk with 'em when they fu'st come onto the place. Where they hailed frum 'fore they struck the Gulch, he don't know. An' no one knows, 'less it's Mascot and Towsley."

"There's two chaps that needs watchin' ever' minute in the day!" leaning forward and speaking in a half-whisper. "Fer all they jumped in so lively to-day, I think they know more'n they'd keer to tell."

"So do I!" Dolly asserted, her bright eyes flashing. "A heap more!"

"K'rect! An' Dolly, they'd never have Edith carried to Paradise Gulch. Primrose is there, ye know. An' they're as afeard o' him as they air of a blind rattler. Wherever they've took her it hain't been to Paradise Gulch."

"But if I don't find out somethin', I'm a goin' there to-morrer evenin', anyway. I'll lay the case before Primrose, an' if he can't make anythin' out o' it, then I'll know I'm at the end of the trail."

"Put on yer thinkin' cap, Dolly, an' le's do a little cipherin' ourselves. As a starter, le's say that Towsley an' Mascot got these men to carry Miss Edith off. Now, why should they want to do that?"

"To git her out o' the way, you think!"

"But why should they want to git her out o' the way? That wouldn't destroy the will, ner keep you an' me from provin' it in court. No, Dolly! That ain't the reason. They didn't have her carried off jist to git her out o' the way!"

"What'd they do it fer, then?" Dolly questioned, with a mystified air. "They shorely c'u'dn't want to kill her!" and her eyes opened in horror at the suggestion.

"No, I calc'late they wouldn't want to kill her. I ain't cert'in what they do want, but I have idees. They mean to hold her till she gives up the will to them, er else Mascot Bill is a goin' to force her to marry him, hopin' to git holt o' the property that way. Fer it's the property they're after."

Dolly's look of horror changed to one of indignation.

"I may be wrong, you know; an' if the bottom figures ain't right, I'm shore to be. So I'm goin' to-morrer evenin' to see Primrose. I'll make another hunt in the mornin' to make certain; an' then I'll go. There's somethin' shore to come of it."

He arose, stretched his bandy legs and went out into the cool night-air, leaving Dolly to put the house to rights and puzzle over the strange events of the past twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TONY AS A SHADOW.

THE search the next morning was as unavailing as those that had preceded it, and Tony started for Paradise Gulch. He was intercepted on the way by the messenger from Prince Primrose. Great was the honest cowboy's astonishment when he learned that Edith was in Paradise Gulch, unharmed and well, and free to come and go as she pleased.

The letter detailed the manner of her escape from her abductors; and closed by requesting Tony to take charge of the ranch, as far as that was possible in the then state of affairs, and to look after Edith's interests, "with a revolver in hand, if necessary." The handwriting was that of Primrose.

"Well, if this don't take the bake-shop!" he exclaimed, when he had carefully spelled out the contents. "I'm blame glad that I started, anyway. Them fellers needn't never know that I got this letter. An' it's best that they shouldn't. They're goin' it blind, now; an' I don't keer to go give 'em any p'inters. Edith in Paradise Gulch, as free an' chipper as an antelope! An' Prince Primrose a-backin' her! Wonder what they'll think when they find that out?"

His joy was so great that his face fairly shone with it; and to the message he returned the promise that he would hold the fort, if he had to go about with "a revolver in both hands."

On his return to the ranch he found Towsley and Mascot Bill gone, and shrewdly guessed that they had taken advantage of his absence to visit the rendezvous where they expected to find Edith and her abductors.

"An' they'll come back feelin' meaner an' more like murder than an Apache!" was his characteristic comment.

Dolly was equally pleased at the unexpected revelation. She had been almost hysterical during the day, and could scarcely be comforted by Tony's many assurances that all would come right in the end.

The change in her manner and appearance was so gratifying that Tony could not resist the temptation to steal an occasional kiss from her cheery-red lips.

Mascot and Towsley did not return until late the next day. Then they looked disturbed and uneasy and were almost continually together, conferring in low tones and exhibiting their perturbation in a marked way.

"I'm goin' to shadder them fellers an' find what they're up to!" Tony confided to his sweetheart. "They're as restless as ponies in fly time."

When darkness fell he put his resolve into execution. The plotters had hung about the stables ever since their return, and there he found them, seated on some hay, with heads bent together and talking in hoarse whispers.

It was not easy to get near them without discovery, but Tony finally succeeded and listened intently to their murmured conversation.

But the result was scarcely worth the peril and effort.

He learned for one thing that he was right in his conjecture that they were the real authors of the abduction. A rendezvous had been appointed in the mountains, and a cabin was also mentioned. But nothing was said to indicate where the rendezvous and cabin were; although it appeared that they had visited both. They were greatly concerned at their failure to find their paid tools at either place with Edith; and they were full of wild conjectures as to what had occurred and doubt as to the course to be pursued.

After a time they arose and left the stable, and Tony crept back to the house to impart his information to, and counsel with, Dolly.

The next day an official came out from Paradise Gulch and served upon Towsley a notice of the filing of a copy of the new will.

The result was as if a bomb had been exploded in their midst.

Tony was wild with curiosity to know what the visit of the official portended, and sneaked about all afternoon in the hope of ascertaining.

Towsley and Mascot seemed more than ever disturbed after that, and remained together all the time, gesticulating and talking and giving an occasional glance at the house.

"I b'lieve they mean to raid the shabang!" Tony whispered, excitedly fingering his revolvers. "If they try it while I'm aroun' there'll be war!"

That night they again withdrew to the stables and Tony followed them, creeping from point to point like a cat.

Work on the ranch had been practically abandoned since Edith's abduction, and very little had been done for some time before. There were almost enough cowboys to attend to the work of the busy season. But there was, at this time, little or nothing for them to do, and they whiled away the monotonous days by recounting doughty and apocryphal adventures and playing cards.

Most of them were new men, and Tony believed they had been collected there for no good purpose. As they were a rough and villainous lot, his belief had ample justification.

Mascot and Towsley had taken a position at the further end of the stable this evening, and Tony found it much more difficult to get near them. To reach a place where he could hear distinctly, he was compelled to crawl in among the ponies. But his perseverance was amply rewarded by the first sentence.

"We'll have to go through the house tonight. That infernal Tony can't keep awake all the time, and when he's asleep will be our chance."

The words were by Mascot.

"This new turn of affairs will make it necessary for us to do something, or we'll be tumbled out of here almost before we know it. Edith must have bribed our men to release her. That's why they left the country. The scoundrels had their price, of course, and her bid went above ours. Then she put out for Paradise Gulch and proposes to fight us from that vantage ground.

"We must give her credit for shrewdness, but it knocks our little plans into pi."

The recollection drew from Towsley a fierce oath.

"Now, the question is, what are we to do? If the will isn't in the house, or we can't find it, it puts us at a disadvantage that can hardly be overcome. She may have taken it with her, you know, though I told the fellows to see that she took nothing from the house except her clothing. But, as we know now, they were not to be trusted, and she may have taken it. If she did, of course we can't get it, and for lack of it our little cake is likely to be dough."

"Yes; it's a bad job!" Towsley growled. "A mighty bad job! It makes me feel like knifin' somebody, jis' fer luck!"

At that moment an event, unexpected and disastrous to Tony, occurred. One of the ponies, annoyed by his proximity, lunged out heavily and planted one of its heels full in his breast.

He went over backward, with a crash and a groan, seeing more stars in the space of a second than he had ever beheld in the twinkling firmament above.

Before he could gather his scattered wits so as to recall what had happened and where he was, Ben Towsley was astride of him and Mascot Bill was pinioning his hands with his own *riata*.

It was an awkward and uncomfortable fix, as well as an extremely perilous one, for there was murder in the voices of the men that bent above him.

"Now let's dump him on the hay and see what he's like!" said Mascot. "I think it's Tony. And if it is, we'll make it unpleasant for the sneak."

Tony struggled uselessly, as he was borne to the hay, where he was tossed as unceremoniously as if he were a bag of oats.

Then from some unseen point Mascot resurrected a dark lantern, lighted it, and flashed the rays in his face.

A terrible growl of anger came from the lips of the two men as they saw that it was really Tony they had secured.

"What do you mean by sneaking around in that way?" Mascot demanded, with a fierce scowl.

"I suppose you thought you'd learn something. Precious little good it's likely to do you, though, whatever you heard. Pull his teeth, Towsley!" In obedience to the command Towsley advanced and removed the cowboy's weapons.

"Now, I'm going to ask you some questions, and if you don't answer promptly, we'll string you up."

He halted, as if expecting a reply, but receiving none, continued:

"You've been spying on us a good deal lately, Tony. To-night you grew overbold. In whose interest, or at whose request, have you been doing this?"

Tony maintained a persistent and dogged silence.

"You won't speak? Then I'll answer for you. It was at the request of either Edith Nettleton or Prince Primrose—perhaps both."

The cowboy muttered something that was unintelligible.

"So you are finding your tongue! Glad of it. Now I will trouble you to tell me where that will is. You know what I mean! The one you witnessed. We want it, and mean to have it."

"Why don't ye git it, then?" said Tony, sullenly. "If I knowed I wouldn't tell you."

"Brave words!" with a scornful glance.

"But you'll sing a different song before I'm done with you. Maybe you won't mind telling us, though, what has become of Waxy Joe, and who it is that's playing the ghost business? You ain't quite clever enough for that!"

"Drop it!" growled Towsley, shivering with fear and glancing uneasily among the shadows. "If you speak o' that ag'in, hanged ef I don't bolt!"

Mascot Bill laughed hollowly, and seemed almost equally disturbed.

"Perhaps I'd better. A grave-yard subject is apt to set a man's teeth on edge in the dark!"

Then, to Tony:

"About that will! Come, now! Where is it? Speak up, or we'll choke your black tongue out."

"S'arch 'im!" exclaimed Towsley. "Where's the use o' so much chinnin'? Mebbe he's got it himself!"

Tony groaned in spirit as the words fell on his ears. Alas! the will—the original—rested at that moment snugly in a pocket of his coat. As he remembered it, the cold sweat came out on his face in great drops.

He had feared to go with it to the cave. But why had he not concealed it somewhere? There were plenty of places where it could have been securely hidden. But he had not; and now could only writhe in an agony of regret.

Mascot smiled as he noticed the change in Tony's countenance. Without further questions he stepped forward, made a hurried search and drew out a couple of papers.

"I do believe it's here!" he cried, exultantly. "Hold the lantern, Towsley, while I look them over."

Towsley sprang to obey, and Mascot spread the first paper out on his knee. It was the will! "Luck's with us!" he exclaimed, his black eyes shining feverishly. "It's the will. The Simon-pure, original document itself. There's Nettleton's signature. I'd know it anywhere. Towsley, we've won the game! With this in our hands we can defy them. They have filed a copy, but they'll not be able to produce the original, and the first will, your will, is bound to stand. This is glory enough for one night; but we'll see what the other paper contains."

He carefully folded the will and passed it to Towsley, who placed it securely in his breast.

Then the other paper was spread out and examined by the light of the lantern.

It was Primrose's letter to Tony, describing Edith's escape, outlining his plans, and requesting the cowboy to look carefully after the young lady's interests at the ranch.

For an instant Towsley and Mascot Bill sat staring blankly at each other.

"So, it wasn't a case of bribery at all!" Mascot ventured, solemnly.

"No!" whispered Towsley, quaking in every limb, and his voice almost a croak. "'Twas the ghost!"

A puff of wind moved the hay and disturbed the flame of the lantern.

Turning their heads they saw that one of the small side doors was open, and in the door stood the ghost of the ranch king.

Towsley uttered a yell of fear and darted out at the front entrance, and Mascot Bill followed him with trembling haste.

Never before had Tony fainted. But when that ghostly figure advanced toward him his head spun round like a top and he knew no more.

A little later he was surrounded by a group of cowboys, who had been drawn to the stable by Towsley's yell. These carried him out, undid his bonds, and placed him beneath the pump; and when he came to he was being strangled and half-drowned with cold water.

The bull's-eye lantern, as he learned afterward, was found overturned on the hay, but there were no papers. Even in his fright, Mascot Bill had clung to that letter.

And the will! Ben Towsley had carried it away, close pressed to his hairy breast.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TONY VISITS PRIMROSE.

"LET up!" cried Tony, gasping like a fish, as the cold water splashed into his face.

Then, as memory returned, his eyes rolled and his face became expressive of terror.

"Where is it?"

"What?" in a questioning chorus.

"The—the ghost! Old Nettleton's ghost! Didn't ye see it, when—when you picked me up in the stable?"

"Nary ghost, pard!" exclaimed Jim Long, in an assuring tone. "We heerd a yell; and when we run in, there you was layin' in a fit. Nothin' else—on'y this lantern tipped over."

It suddenly occurred to Tony that it might be undesirable to reveal all that had transpired to that mixed company of cowboys.

"Guess I was purty bad skered!" he explained, rising and, dog-like, shaking the water from his hair and clothing. "I was nosin' roun' the stable, an' I thought I seen Nettleton's ghost. Fool-like, I keeled over, and the next thing I knowed you was pumpin' water on me."

"But what about the yell, an' the lantern?" asked one of the men.

"P'raps I give the yell, an' p'raps the ghost left the lantern. It's a cur'us bizness an' I can't explain it."

With this unsatisfactory answer he walked away, leaving Jim Long to reel out to the excited and startled cowboys his story of the ghost's appearance to Mascot Bill and Ben Towsley.

Dolly wrung her hands in dismay when she learned that Mascot and Towsley had obtained possession of the will and the letter.

"Yes, it's a bad bizness!" Tony confessed. "A monstrous bad bizness. Blamed ef I know what to do. An' that ghost, or whatever it was, has jist nat'rally took all the blood out o' me. I ain't got enough grit, now, to poke my head out o' doors, hardly."

Dolly shivered and looked uneasily about, as if she half expected to see the uncanny thing come through the solid wall.

"But I mus' try, some way, to git that will back!" he continued, examining the *riata* to see if it had been injured by the ordeal through which it had passed. "I can't look Miss Edith in the face, never, if I don't. How to do it, though, ruther gits me."

The scrutiny of the *riata* gave him an idea.

"I might, if't wasn't fer that ghost. I could lay out on the perarie and watch for a chance to rope Towsley. He's got the will. I c'd snake 'im in easy, if he come near me!"

This suggestion presented itself as a duty, but he tried to avoid it, twisting and squirming on the chair, as he sought for a valid justification of its neglect.

"I'll have to try, anyhow, ghost er no ghost!" he exclaimed, finally. "I couldn't never rest easy if I didn't. Git me a bite to eat, Dolly, an' some coffee to study my nerves, an' I'll do it! It 'most takes all the grit out o' me to think of it; but I'll do it."

Dolly began a protest; but his look of stern resolve silenced her, and she set out the "bite" and the coffee on the kitchen table.

He felt better after eating and looked to his weapons with something of his old spirit. Then, gathering up his trusty *riata*, he went out into the night.

He first visited the bunk-house, called out Jim Long, and asked if Mascot and Towsley had been seen within the last hour.

On learning that they had not, he dismissed Long with a plausible explanation for the question, and then proceeded for some little distance along the trail leading to the stables and bunk-house.

Every sound caused him to start and cower and the rustling of the grass recalled vividly the almost noiseless movements of the apparition.

But Tony, when he had once firmly made up his mind to face a danger, was not easily turned back.

In this grass, near to some bunches of cacti and sage-bush, he concealed himself, with the snaky *riata* grasped in his right hand.

He felt sure that when the plotters returned, they would pass that way, because of the broken trail.

Hour after hour went slowly by. The wind sighed drearily and the clouds drifted across the sky in suggestive and spectral shapes. The howl of a far-off coyote occasionally sent a thrill through his strained nerves. Then the moon came up, and indications of the approach of day appeared along the Eastern horizon. But Towsley and Mascot did not return.

Tony wondered if, in their fright, they had left the ranch for good. The suggestion was pleasant, but he felt that the hope it held was false.

Then, as the light in the East increased, he crept back to the house, stiffened, and chilled, and with a mind ill at ease.

As the day passed and still they did not return, Tony began to think that the suggestion might be true, after all. But Dolly combated the belief; and, taking everything into consideration, Tony was forced to confess that it was more likely they were remaining away to

perfect their plans, or, perhaps, put them in operation.

After dinner he announced that he would wait for them no longer.

"I'm goin' to Paradise Gulch!" he declared. "I can't see daylight any more, but mayby Primrose kin. Anyway he ought to know that they've got the will."

He placed a revolver in Dolly's hand and told her to use it if it became necessary; and that probably he would not be back until the following morning. If Primrose needed his services he would be away even longer.

Dolly was a courageous young woman, but the events of the past few days had tended to shake her nerves. At such times a sense of impending peril will descend on the bravest. However, she urged no objections against Tony's departure, and even assisted him, with a cheerful face to get ready. But she could not help saying, as he rode away:

"I do hope, Tony, you kin git back to-night. It's so—so lonesome hyer, an'—awful!"

Tony knew she was thinking of the ghost, and promised that he would return at the earliest possible moment.

He kept a sharp lookout for Mascot and Towsley during that lonely ride. He saw nothing, and reached Paradise Gulch just before sunset.

Primrose was absent, he was informed, but would be back in an hour or two. Tony spent the interval of waiting in strolling about the town, looking up old acquaintances and keeping a sharp watch for Edith. He would have called on her had he known where to go.

Primrose had spent the day at the Blue Bonnet Mine, and did not return until about nine o'clock. Tony was sitting on the office steps, his figure dimly revealed by a street lamp, when Primrose approached.

"Thought you wasn't never comin'!" Tony exclaimed, advancing from the shadows and extending his hand. "I've been waitin' fer ye fer hours."

"Why, Tony! It's you, is it? What brought you here? Got my letter I suppose? Come into the shop!"

He unlocked the door, as he talked, and led the way into the office, where he lighted the lamp.

"Yes, I got yer letter!" Tony replied, sinking into a chair, and depositing his *riata* and sombrero in a heap on the floor. "But I ain't got it now!"

"No? What's become of it?"

"That's what I rid in to tell ye 'bout!" and Tony launched into a recital of the events that led to the loss of the letter and will.

Primrose listened to the narration with a feeling akin to dismay.

However, after thinking the matter over a little, he brightened somewhat and seemed inclined to take a hopeful, if not cheery, view of the case.

"I think, Tony, we can head them off! Why they have left the ranch, I don't know, of course. But it occurs to me it may have been done to avoid arrest. We could have them arrested for stealing those papers, I think, and maybe they feared we would. At any rate it seems to me that we can get over the loss of the will, though I can't be sure until I have consulted the lawyer."

"Edith is perfectly familiar with the wording, and you and Dolly can also swear to its contents. We can prove that it was stolen and show the manner and why, and then bring in you three to prove its contents. I am sure it can be done, Tony; so that little trick will not do them much good, after all."

Tony's downcast face lost its look of perplexity and gloom, and became wreathed in smiles of delight.

"I knowed you could take the kinks out o' the thing if anybody could. Now, if I could on'y telygraph what you said to Dolly, I'd be happy!"

"You can tell her to-morrow. I wonder she isn't afraid to stay there since those ghostly manifestations."

"She is!" exclaimed the cowboy. "'Fraid ain't no name fer it. She's skeered of her shadow. But she wouldn't own it—not if she believed the thing was a-goin' to come an' carry her off."

Then, dropping her voice to a hollow whisper:

"I never thought I could be made to believe much in this hyer ghost bizness—an' I ain't a-sayin' I believe it yit. But what do you think it kin be? I seen it with my own two eyes; an' if they is such a thing as ghosts, that was the ghost o' old Nettleton, the ranch king."

His eyes were filled with horror, as he concluded, showing how much the memory affected him.

"No doubt, Tony, you saw something!" Primrose replied, noticing the look. "But no sensible man can believe it was a ghost. Only ignorant people believe in such things. My own opinion is that it's Waxy Joe, playing ghost for some purpose which we cannot now understand. You must remember that the supposed ghost has never been seen in daylight. Daylight is fatal to all ghosts. That shows that they cannot bear investigation, and so seek the darkness to successfully carry out their plans."

"If you should come upon that ghost in the full glare of the sun, you wouldn't be at all afraid of it, for its mysterious character would be swept away. You could then tell what it really is, and so would not be at all frightened."

"The question of disguise is very simple, when you recollect that you have never had a good view of the thing. What most impressed you was the long, white hair falling on the creature's shoulders. You don't recall anything else, except that it moved slowly and quietly. Now, what is to hinder any one from disguising himself in that way? Waxy could do it as well as another. Take my word for it, Tony, when you know the truth, you will discover that the ghost is only Waxy Joe disguised with a wig of white hair pulled from the manes and tails of ponies."

Tony Bowers had implicit faith in the wisdom of Prince Primrose, and this explanation came with all the force of an oracle. He had never thought of Waxy Joe in that connection.

"Well, may I be shot!" he cried, dropping his hand heavily to his knee, as Primrose ended. "I never would 'a' thought o' that. An' hyer I've been a-shakin' the teeth out o' my head fer fear o' the thing. If I don't rope that air Waxy, it'll be because I never git near him ag'in. To think o' him playin' a trick like that! It gits me; an' when I recollect how I keeled over at jist seein' him, I want to go out an' kick myself fer bein' a plaguey fool."

So full was he of this new view of the affair, and of the hope that Primrose had given him in reference to the will, that he insisted on returning immediately so that he could share the "news" with Dolly.

Primrose smiled, as the cowboy left the office in such haste, forgetting that he would have done the same had Dolly been Edith, and he similarly circumstanced.

The next morning he called at Edith's boarding-house for the purpose of acquainting her with the information brought in by Tony, and of conferring with her in regard to the course to be now pursued.

To his dismay he learned that Edith was missing—mysteriously missing! She had gone to her room at the usual hour the evening before, and had not been seen since.

CHAPTER XXX.

MORE PLOTTING.

BEN TOWSLEY was wild with superstitious fear when he bolted from the stable and dashed out into the darkness. He would have run until he fell exhausted, if Mascot Bill's voice had not restrained and checked him.

"Don't be a fool, Towsley!" grated the latter, who was beginning to recover from his sudden fright. "Pull up a little while and give yourself a chance to get over your scare."

He laid his hand on Towsley's shoulder, only to have it shaken off with a fierce snarl.

Mascot Bill was the more intelligent of the two. His fright at that sudden apparition was great, but as he got out into the open air and away from the uncanny place, his courage began to return. He had been scared in the same way by the ghost's first appearance, but had argued himself out of it as he grew cooler. He was going through the same mental process now.

"Don't be a fool, Towsley!" he repeated, un-mindful of the snarl. "Let's stop long enough to get cool and take an inventory of our stock in trade. We're not so badly off as we might be. The—the thing might have robbed us, you know! We've got the will and the letter, recollect."

His teeth chattered a little, but otherwise he was outwardly cool.

"What do you want?" cried Towsley, turning like an animal at bay. "Durn the will! I won't have anything more to do with it. I'm goin' to clear out of hyer, I am. I won't stay on a place that's ha'nted, ner I won't budge another inch in this hyer thing, eft's a-goin' to raise up spooks ag'in me. That's the secon' time he's appeared to us. I reckon you've heard the sayin': 'Beware o' the third time!' Ef he comes ag'in, we'll be ghosts ourselves; an' I ain't ready fer that yit!"

The very little that Mascot Bill had assumed showed that he was not free from superstition; but he was battling for big stakes, now, and resolutely put his fears behind him.

"Oh, stow that third time bizness, Towsley! There ain't anything in it. It's a whim fit only for some childish old woman. We're men! Or, if we're not, we ought to be. Sit down on that stone and let's see where we are."

Although unconvinced, Towsley submitted, as the inferior mind generally submits to the superior.

"We've run about a mile, I think, and I'm played out."

"What's a mile to a thing like that?" said Towsley, rolling his eyes about in the gloom.

"Not much, probably, if it's a ghost! I argued myself into thinking, after seeing it the first time, that it wasn't anything of the kind. My good sense tells me, now, that it can't be. Still, the thing did give me a start and I don't care to come close to it again."

"The question I wanted to talk of, though, is, what had we better do?"

"Quit! That's my vote! Quit the hull bizness, an' light out o' hyer. I wouldn't have this ranch, now, ef I c'd git it as a free gift. I wouldn't live on it fer it."

"You'll think differently when it comes daylight!" Mascot urged, soothingly. "Your nerves are unstrung, now. I think I know how you feel. And I know, too, that you'll change your mind."

To this assurance Towsley said nothing, but his silence was strongly suggestive of his lack of belief.

"We've got the will!" Mascot went on, not heeding the silence. "That gives us a big advantage, and we'd be worse than fools if we backed out of the game, now. We must go ahead. As for the ranch, if it's haunted, as it seems to be, let it be haunted, we needn't stay here. We needn't have anything further to do with it. That is, not a great deal. And when we get our money out of it we can let it slide together."

Towsley picked up a little courage when he found that Mascot did not intend to insist on returning to the ranch. He had an itching palm, and if there was any way of filling it that did not involve a third meeting with the ghost he was willing to listen to it.

"Well, how're ye goin' to work it?" he growled.

"By a plan that's just come to me. You see we can't go ahead, now, in the line that we had marked out. I was afraid we couldn't, when that officer brought that notice, and this letter makes it certain."

"If our little game hadn't miscarried we would have been all right and could have soon had our fingers on a snug little sum of money. But our men failed to get away with the young lady and that let everything in that line to the ground."

Towsley stopped trembling long enough to roll out a string of sulphurous maledictions.

"Yes; it's aggravating. But swearing won't set it to rights. If we could have kept that young lady out of the way for awhile, and in some manner accounted for her absence, we could have gone on with the court business and arranged ours so that, within a few months, our pockets, would have been well lined."

"We didn't, though; and we know, now, that she's in Paradise Gulch and that Prince Primrose is backing her against us and proposes to make a legal fight. We've got the will, and while that may not defeat them it's bound to cause a great deal of delay. So, you see, it puts splendid fighting-ground again under our feet."

Towsley was listening intently, but he wholly failed to see what his friend was leading up to.

"Well!" he exclaimed, almost wearily.

"What then?"

"Simply that we must once more resort to bold measures. We can't do anything along the old lines, the way things are now. We can't hold the ranch for any great length of time. We don't dare try to collect that fifty thousand you hold in notes. It's too risky to be seriously thought of. And this official notice virtually ties your hands as far as handling the young lady's finances goes."

"Not by a jugful it don't!" declared Towsley, doggedly.

"Of course you can go ahead, but your bondsmen will be held responsible for any waste or damage."

"Midas has got that fixed!" chucklingly. "The bonds ain't wuth the paper they're writ on."

"Then we could drive away a lot of cattle and sell them and skip with the money. But we'd have to be quick about it. Primrose is no fool, and his lawyer will demand new bondsmen as soon as he finds out the characters and financial condition of the present ones. The trouble with that is it won't bring us money enough. The cattle are scattered and it will be hard to collect and market any large number."

"What's to be done, then?" Towsley growled.

"Make a bold move, as I said. Carry off Edith! And to make sure that there's no balk in the job, do it ourselves. Primrose is head over ears in love with that girl, though he's so quiet there's few that know it. For a time he'd almost tear up the mountains hunting for her, and we'd have to lay mighty low. Then he'd simmer down and offer almost any sum we might name to have her restored; and she'd be willing to have him make the offer out of her property, too, when she'd been in our hands a couple of weeks. Especially if some soothing letters were written to him on the subject."

He stopped and laughed in a disagreeable way, and tried to read his companion's countenance in the darkness.

"I'm willin' to tackle anything that'll bring us money an' take us away from this cussed place!" Towsley averred, breathing easier, now that Mascot's plan was fully outlined.

"Well, that will do it. Anyway, it will take us from the place, and I think it will bring the money. It may be necessary to visit the ranch occasionally, but as you seem to have objections to anything in that line I'll do the visitin'. I

don't suppose the ghost will tackle me if I come in daylight."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"Shet that off!" gritted Towsley. "Yegimme the creeps. Ef ye don't, I'll drap the hull thing right hyer an' skeddadle."

"It's shut off," with another mirthless laugh. "And now let's slide, for we must reach Paradise Gulch before daylight. We'll have to hoof it, I suppose."

"You bet!" exclaimed Towsley, rising. "I wouldn't go back to that stable to-night fer all the hosses in the Territory."

Mascot Bill pointed his handsome nose toward the distant town, and swung out in long strides, and Towsley fell in behind like the tow of a tug.

CHAPTER XXXI. BOLD MEASURES.

WHEN they reached Paradise Gulch it was almost daylight; but as the streets were still deserted, they succeeded in gaining the residence of Colonel Midas without attracting any notice.

The pompous colonel growled like a bulldog at being aroused so early, but when he saw who his visitors were he swallowed his wrath and invited them in.

"Now, what is it?" he cried, when he had shown them to the little sitting-room and called a sleepy-eyed boy to bring in a bottle of liquor and some glasses. "Something's happened out of the common, or you wouldn't be here at such an unhealthy hour."

He planted his fat legs firmly, and placing his hands beneath his coat-tails, waved the said tails gently up and down in a questioning way.

"Yes, there has," replied Mascot, producing the will and the letter. "Look them over, and while you're doing it we'll eat something, if you'll be kind enough to order it."

Midas shouted an additional order to the boy, and a little later, he of the sleepy eyes staggered in with a loaded tray.

There were fruits, and dainties, and potted meats, flanked by a bottle of liquor and a plate of crackers. The colonel was a bachelor, and took his meals at a restaurant. These were simply the extras with which he tickled his palate between times, for Midas was notorious as a heavy feeder.

Before the boy had finished arranging the contents of the tray upon the little table, Towsley dashed at them and proceeded to help himself. Mascot Bill followed his greedy example, and Midas could get no more from either of them until they had satisfied their hunger.

Then, with slow deliberation, Mascot replied to his questions, and outlined the plan he had communicated to Towsley.

"Well, I don't know about it!" Midas declared. "I don't know whether I want to go into it or not. I went deeper into this other affair of yours than I intended, and here you say it's to be abandoned. I don't care to entangle myself further. The reward is not great enough nor definite enough."

Mascot and Towsley looked their dismay.

"Why, we can pull fifteen or twenty thousand out of the trick anyhow, and you'll get your third!" urged Mascot.

"A beggarly five or six thousand! Quite a falling off from your first figures!"

Midas swelled pompously, as if he were above fingering such sums.

"Well, it's the best we can do!" Mascot retorted. "If you don't want to go into it we'll go ahead without you, and then skip. Of course you'll keep your mouth shut until we're well out of the country?"

He believed that Midas was angling for a larger division of the spoils, and determined to "bluff him." The result showed that he had taken an accurate measurement of the man. Midas dropped his patronizing and inflated air, and replied with some show of uneasiness:

"Oh, I suppose I'll have to see you through, since we've pulled together so far. But I'm afraid you've outlined a plan that's risky."

"It needn't be to you!" Mascot asserted. "We'll shoulder the risks, personal and otherwise. All we ask you to do is to look after this court business, and keep us posted as to what goes on here, and, if we're caught, to stand by us with your ducats. As the silent partner, of course, you'll have to put up the dust for the expenses."

To this after some demur, Midas consented. Mascot listened to his objections impatiently, knowing what the final result would be, then requested him to look up the lodging-house of Edith Nettleton, and locate her apartment.

"Don't fail in that! And, if you'll show us to a room, we'll sleep a little while you're at it!"

Midas, with all his pomposity, was a sly dog, and had under him a number of cunning tools. With the aid of these it was not a difficult matter for him to locate Edith, and determine the best method by which her room could be surreptitiously reached.

All through the day Mascot and Towsley remained in Midas's rooms. Nor did they leave them until some time after dark.

Then, like guilty things, they crept out into

the shadows and stole softly from point to point, avoiding the glare of the street lamps and the crowds of loungers in front of the saloons.

The private boarding-house, where Edith was temporarily stopping, stood on a quiet, side street, away from the noises of the business thoroughfares. The street, even in the early evening, was haunted by but few people. Thus, it will be seen, it was located with especial advantage for the accomplishment of the plans of the plotters.

From a side door, opening on a narrow hall, a stairway ran to the second floor, and Edith's room was at the head of this stairway.

From the street they saw her in the parlor below, with a number of ladies.

"Chatterin' like sparrers!" said Towsley. "Women allus does, when you put 'em together. It gives us a beautiful lay-out, though."

They walked quietly into the yard and slipped to the side door. Here they removed their shoes and stole softly up the stairway and into Edith's room, the door of which stood slightly ajar.

Behind this they ensconced themselves with drawn weapons; and awaited, with what patience they could, her return to the room. It was a long time to wait.

"I do b'lieve they're a-goin' to talk all night!" growled Towsley, shifting his position. "I've stood humped up hyer tell my back's nigh about broke."

"Sh!" warned Mascot. "The visitors went some time ago, and, if I'm not mistaken, she's getting ready to come up-stairs. It must be eleven o'clock."

His words were soon confirmed by a light step in the hall below, and the swish of feminine drapery on the stairway.

Both men drew in their breath with a sort of gasp, now that the supreme moment had come, and stood with tense muscles and strained nerves.

The light of a lamp held in Edith's hand streamed into the apartment; and, a moment later, she entered, holding the lamp out before her.

Depositing it on a little stand, she turned about and found herself covered by a pair of revolvers, one held by each of the wretches.

An inarticulate cry involuntarily arose to her lips, only to die away, as Mascot's low, stern words reached her:

"Don't say a word, if you have any regard for your life. We don't intend to harm you."

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked, falteringly.

"Simply that we want you to come with us, Miss Nettleton. You know us; and you ought to know us well enough to be assured that we intend you no harm. If you will go quietly, it will greatly please us; but go you must, whether quiet or otherwise."

"Wh—where are you going to take me? and what is it for?"

The questions were put in hope of gaining time to think.

"Come, we haven't time to talk or parley. You must go along, and now! Tie her hands, Towsley. If she screams out, I'll put a bullet through her head. We mean business and can't afford to fool."

There was a tigerish ferocity in his tones that appalled her. It seemed impossible that this could be the handsome and dashing Mascot Bill who had once flattered her foolish fancy by his cavalier-like attentions.

Towsley advanced and quickly bound the unresisting hands.

"Now, let's slide!" he growled.

"Slide it is!" exclaimed Mascot. "You go first and I'll bring up the rear with the young lady."

Edith seemed rooted to the floor. A score of plans for escape leaped through her mind, each to be in turn discarded.

"Move on!" commanded Mascot, his brow darkening. "If you don't I'll tie you up like a bale of goods and carry you."

There was no help for it. She must go. Suddenly she remembered that her precious revolver was in the pocket of her cloak.

"Let me get my cloak, first!" she requested. "The night-air is cool."

"Yes! get your cloak and anything else you want in the way of clothing. But hurry up about it!"

He untied her hands, and held his weapon in readiness, as she moved away.

For a moment the temptation to seize the little revolver and shoot him was almost irresistible. But she dare not. The act would make of her a murderer, pursued through life by the hell-hounds of unavailing and undying remorse. And besides, if she could bring herself to commit so horrible a deed, there stood Towsley, with pistol ready to send her soul after that of the man she had slain.

The temptation and the thoughts engendered by it fairly made her reel, and cast upon her such a spell of weakness that she could scarcely don the cloak.

"Hurry up!" growled Mascot, fingering his revolver impatiently. "You're consuming too much time. More, it seems to me, than is necessary."

"Lead on!" she said, hardening herself to the

inevitable. "And you may as well put up that pistol. You know I can't get away."

"I'll put it up, if you'll promise not to cry out or attempt to escape. I know you, and your word is as good as your oath."

"I promise," she answered, though it cost a struggle.

Mascot Bill put up his weapon, without a word, and followed her down the stairs, Ben Towsley leading the way.

When they reached the street, they hurried her along it until an alley was gained, and this they followed until they came to the suburbs of the town.

Here, in the shadows of a deserted building, three ponies were hitched. They were saddled and bridled, and to and behind the saddles were fastened blankets and a number of packages.

"You seem to have prepared well for this!" she exclaimed, noticing the packages, and also that a woman's saddle was on the back of one of the ponies.

Mascot laughed. It pleased him to see her take the abduction so coolly.

"Yes. We figured everthing out beforehand. It's always the best way. One is not so liable to blunder. And, besides, I thought it well to take along provisions, not knowing when we will return."

"Where are we going?"

"Get into the saddle, and I'll tell you as we jog along."

His tone was authoritative, and he held out his hand to assist her.

Then, when they were all mounted, and moving away from the town:

"We're going to take you into the mountains and hold you for ransom. We've figured out about how much you're worth to the Nettleton Ranch and also to a certain gentleman named Primrose. When that amount is forthcoming, you can go free. And you'll not go free a minute sooner."

He gave her pony a cut with a stick and the trio rode rapidly away toward the somber-looking mountains.

CHAPTER XXXII.

EDITH IN CAPTIVITY.

THEY did not take the trail that Primrose had followed on his journey to the claim, but struck into one that led at right-angles to it.

Edith's heart was filled with misgivings as they galloped on, though one would not have guessed it from her brave demeanor. Again and again her thoughts turned to Primrose and she wondered when he would discover that she had been abducted and what he would do on making the discovery. She felt sure that he would put forth every effort to effect her rescue.

"But he will never be able to follow us!" she thought, with an inward moan. "This worn and dusty trail will give no clew to the direction we are taking."

A thoughtful light came into her eyes, and slowly, with her disengaged hand she tore into bits the handkerchief that was in one of the pockets of her cloak. These she slyly dropped from time to time, as she had opportunity, trusting that the wind would lodge them where they could be seen.

"I promised I would not attempt to escape! But I did not promise that I would not try to lead any one to my rescue!" she mentally exclaimed, in justification of the deed.

Mascot kept the ponies going at a lively gait and paid little attention to her until they were well in toward the mountains. Then he slackened the speed.

"While we were at it I wish we had made a further capture!" he said, speaking apparently to both. "You ought to have a female attendant or companion. I didn't think of it in time or we could have picked up some one that would have answered the purpose."

"One's enough!" growled Towsley. "Two 'em together would only hatch devilment. You couldn't trust 'em."

"Perhaps not!" with a disagreeable laugh. "That is, if we left them entirely alone. But we wouldn't do that. One of us would have to remain about the place. The thought struck me that it would be pleasanter for Edith: that's all!"

"Where are you going to take me?" she questioned.

"Into the mountains, as I told you! There's an old, abandoned hunter's hut up there, that I stumbled onto one day; and it's the very thing. It's in fairly good condition and will not make a bad home for awhile."

"You see, I'm not trying to deceive you, and I hope you'll remember it in my favor after it's all over. And we mean to treat you well, so long as you let us. We're after money, Towsley and I; and we're bound to have it."

"Why don't you go to work for it, then, like honest men?"

The retort irritated him somewhat, but he controlled his fiery temper.

"Because, Miss Edith, it's too slow a process and entirely too laborious to suit me. I prefer to take the shorter route!"

"Which leads offener to a prison gate than to the door of wealth."

"That's enough in the lecture line!" he snarled. "It isn't pleasant, even from lips as sweet as yours. When you have such thoughts I'd advise you to keep them to yourself. We'll get along better and you'll have an easier time. I don't like to hear them!"

"Ner I!" exclaimed Towsley, pulling savagely at his beard. "We're 'bout as honest as the gin'ral run. I don't 'low that this is wuss'n saltin' wu'thless mines and sellin' 'em at high figgers to tenderfeet an' half-cracked pilgrims from the East. Half the world steals from t'other half in one way er anuther; an' we might's well rake in some o' the ducats as the rest o' the folks."

To this one-sided philosophy Edith did not venture a reply. The tones of Mascot's protest had somewhat frightened her. She remembered that he had a fiery and ungovernable temper, at times, and wisely resolved to avoid giving him cause for further offense.

Her captors also relapsed into silence; and, without more words, they jogged on until the mountains appeared to tower just above them, seeming gigantic shadows against the background of the night.

At this point they left the beaten trail and struck out over a rough and rugged country. For some time Edith had been expecting them to do this, and so was prepared for the movement.

She had managed to extract a couple of old letters from an inner pocket of the cloak and transfer them to one of the outer pockets. These letters she had quietly torn into slips; and now began dropping them at the pony's feet.

She deposited several at and near the point where they left the trail, so as to call the attention of pursuers to the new course. Then, as they were traveling over a grassy soil, into which she judged the feet of the ponies would sink to some extent, she husbanded the remaining strips for use when the way should become hard and flinty.

In all this she manifested that remarkable judgment which had come to her as a part of the education of a life passed in a wild and half-civilized country.

And she found abundant use for these bits of paper, for they soon entered a rough and boulder-strewn section that led them rapidly into the heart of the hills.

Day was now close at hand.

"Yonder is the cabin!" announced Mascot, pointing it out with his hand. "A cozy nest you'll find it, though of course lacking in the many little refinements you've been accustomed to. It's as well hidden as a bird's nest; and if your friends discover you there, they are shrewder than I give them credit for."

Edith looked, with questioning eyes, along the dimly-lighted level over which they were riding, but saw nothing that would suggest a house.

"There!" exclaimed Mascot, pointing again. "Don't you see it? It's in that clump of trees and scrub."

Thus directed, she saw the low gable of a hunter's hut protruding slightly above the leafy screen, but so corresponding in tint to the color of the bare brown hills at its back as to almost defy detection.

"A regular bird's nest, is it not? And a pleasant one, if you are minded to make it so. Our plan is to keep out of the way of observation until the first hue and cry is over, and then enter into negotiations with that elegant Prince Primrose for your return to Paradise Gulch."

Mascot evidently felt a bitter hatred for Primrose, for he never let an opportunity slip without hurling a sneer at him.

The sneer forced upon Edith a comparison of the two men. Mascot Bill, gaudily dressed, handsome and dashing, and with the heart of a Mephistopheles. Primrose, plain, unprepossessing, almost homely, but intelligent, alert, honest, and true as steel. The comparison was not unfavorable to Primrose, and her heart warmed toward him as she remembered his invariable kindness and goodness.

"Poor, dear, ugly old Primrose!" she soliloquized. "Will I ever have so good a friend again?"

They were now beneath the trees, and at Mascot's command she leaped down and went into the hut.

She could not examine the interior because of the darkness. But when the sun came up she found that it was quite a habitable place. The roof was unbroken, the sides were chinked with sticks and clay, and there were two doors and one tiny window.

In the mean time the articles brought from the town had been carried in by Mascot and Towsley, and Edith, eager for something with which to occupy her overstrained mind and draw it from a contemplation of the miseries of her condition, busied herself in arranging them and putting the cabin to rights.

"Glad to see you taking so kindly to this thing," declared Mascot, with admiration. "I don't know why, but I rather expected to see you rave and weep. This is more sensible. We'll all get along better. I hope you'll not have to stay here long, and you won't, if Primrose is given to reason."

Edith ventured no answer, and he went out to

where Towsley was attending to the wants of the ponies.

While he was gone Edith prepared breakfast, a thing not easy to do in a satisfactory manner with the limited facilities at hand.

But Mascot and Towsley were loud in praises of her skill, declaring she was the best cook they had seen for many a long day.

"You'll get along all right," Mascot asserted. "I see you're able to take care of yourself. Now I'm going away for a while. In fact, I don't know just when I'll return. Perhaps not till to-morrow. I want to find out how your friends are taking your absence. Towsley will stay here, but he will not make his presence obtrusive."

For a long time after they had left the room, the two men stood in the shadow of the trees, conversing in low tones. Then Mascot mounted his pony, and rode away over the crest of the ridge.

Edith was filled with fear lest he should find the bits of paper and cloth she had dropped during the night. She wondered what he would do if he should. Gather them up, doubtless, to keep them from leading any one to their place of concealment.

While thinking of this she determined to escape if an opportunity presented. Her promise to Mascot she believed was no longer binding. She had agreed to go with him quietly, and not try to get away, if he would put up his revolver; but she did not say she would never try to escape. That promise, she argued, only covered the journey, and ended when the journey ended.

But no chance came that day to put her plans into execution. Towsley lounged about under the trees, smoking and idling away the time. Sometimes he climbed to the crest of the ridge, and looked back along the route they had come. But he seldom, for a moment, lost sight of the little hunter's hut, and the patch of scrub and timber in which it was situated.

That night he barred the doors and windows, and rolled up in his blanket on the little grass plot in front of the cabin. He was, in truth, a most vigilant guardian, and Edith's hopes fell when he did that.

"Why are you barring the doors?" she asked him. "The room will be terribly close and stuffy!"

"Plenty air kin git in at the winder and the chimbley. You might try to slide out while I'm asleep. Mascot thinks it's safe to trust ye, but I don't. Women air all-fired slippery critters!"

With this reply he banged to the heavy wooden bolt, and left her to her own reflections, which were bitter enough and tearful enough to keep her awake for the greater part of the night.

Mascot Bill did not return until the morning of the second day, and then he was in a state of great excitement.

"Come out here, Towsley!" he cried, without dismounting from his pony. "I want to talk with you. There's devilment afoot!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SURPRISED LOVERS.

TONY BOWERS, pressed by his burden of new ideas and information, scarcely drew rein until he arrived at the ranch.

It was almost morning, and Dolly was up, having passed a sleepless night, and risen early.

"I jes' couldn't shet my eyes!" she declared, in answer to his questioning look. "Ever' time I did, that there ghost come right up in front o' me, seemed-like, an' I hollered right out. Now, what air you laughin' at, Tony Bowers? If I recollect you was some'at skeered, yerself, t'other night!"

"We've been makin' a pack o' fools o' ourselves, Dolly!" with another laugh. "That there ghost is Waxy Joe, with a lot o' white hoss-hair tied 'round his head. Primrose says so."

She opened her eyes in amazement, but quickly recovered.

"Then Primrose is a fool, an' you're another fer believin' such chaff. Don't I know Waxy Joe? You couldn't no more git him to play ghost than you could git"—she hesitated for an illustration sufficiently striking—"than you could git Ben Towsley to let liquor alone, er Mascot Bill to throw away that red jacket and scarf. Primrose ginerly knows what he's talkin' 'bout, but you kin take my word fer it, Tony Bowers, he's missed the mark this time."

These positive assertions rather staggered Tony and caused the laugh to dwindle into the sickliest kind of a smile.

"You're a comfortin' creeter, Dolly!" he managed to say. "Knock the pins from under a feller's ideas that-away! I come home with my mind made up to visit that air cave and yank Waxy out o' it with a rope, an' hyer you flatten me out like a flap-jack!"

Dolly uttered a little shriek and threw up her hands.

"Why, Tony! That would be temptin' fate! If the ha'n't reely comes from that place it would be as much as yer life's wu'th to go nigh it!"

"Well, I won't do it, then!" he exclaimed, rather glad that an excuse offered. "But they's one thing, Dolly, I've made up my mind to: If

the thing ever comes near me ag'in' I'll rope it!"

"That's what you said afore!" with a look of mingled doubt and scorn. "An' then when it did come you keeled over like a dyin' calf. My advice is to leave sich as that alone."

He flushed at the imputation contained in the tone.

"Come!" Le's talk o' somethin' else!" shifting uneasily. "Primrose has got the plans cut an' dried fer headin' off these rascals. Have they come back?"

"No!" replied Dolly, shaking her head.

"Didn't 'low they would. They're afeard they might be arrested."

With this introduction he unfolded the ideas and plans Primrose had confided, supplementing them with a number of his own.

"What d'ye think of it?" he asked, as he finished. "I'm goin' to take charge o' things hyer an' if Mascot an' Towsley come nosin' an' bossin' round ag'in I'll jist send word to Primrose an' we'll land 'em in jail."

The vision was so rosy that he could not resist stealing a kiss to still further brighten it.

"What do I think?" with a resounding box on the ear. "Why, that you'd better not do that ag'in."

"Couldn't help it, Dolly! 'Twas too temptin'!" twirling his lariat, till it looked like a writhing snake. "Ye oughtn't be so blame good-lookin'! An' when ye git a little excited er mad ye're purtier'n ever."

Dolly was not proof against flattery. The frown which she had, by dint of hard labor, coaxed to her smooth brow, was broken and splintered, into sparkling smiles.

"Now, go on out o' hyer, Tony, 'fore you make me mad ag'in. I want to git breakfast ready to send out to the men and you bother me."

Tony arose and sauntered out, whistling as he went.

"Kinder b'leve she likes to have me make her mad that way, but she won't own it!" he muttered. "Now, what makes a woman that cur'us?"

He reached the stables before he had solved the riddle. Calling out the men he informed them, with grave solemnity, that he had been appointed foreman and that henceforth they were to look to him for orders.

"What's become of Mascot Bill?" demanded one of the new men, a surly villain.

"Don't know; an' not to be imperlite, I don't keer. He's gone! Skedaddled, fer some reason; an' I'm in his place, with full authority and 'p'inted by Miss Edith Nettleton. Them as don't like the change kin do like Mascot."

He glared around, as if he expected to meet opposition.

Jim Long swung his hat and proposed three cheers for the new foreman.

The cheers were rather feeble, for lack of many voices, but Long's stentorian roars made up for the deficiency.

Then the crowd dissolved, Tony walked slowly back to the house, and a little later, Mascot Bill's adherents gathered in a knot near the bunk-rooms and proceeded to discuss the new turn of affairs.

They were not pleased with it, as a matter of course, for to most of them it meant dismissal and the stopping of the wages they were not earning.

They were still talking and gesticulating when Dolly went out to announce that breakfast was ready.

"Mind what I say, they're meanin' dirt o' some kind!" she declared to Tony afterward. "They was that surly an' grum they wouldn't hardly speak. I'm 'most sorry you said what you did. The ranch c'u'd git along very well without a foreman, fer a few days. There's precious little little work to do, that I kin see, anyhow."

"Let 'em growl!" exclaimed Tony, recklessly. "They da'sn't show their teeth to me. I ain't afeard of 'em; an' they know it. 'Twon't be healthy if they try any scaly tricks."

He went off to his room, after eating, determined to get some sleep. But on lying down he discovered that he was not at all sleepy, and returned to the kitchen.

Dolly was flying about, busy with her work, and apparently oblivious to the fact that she had scarcely rested the night before.

"I've been thinking, Dolly," Tony averred, seating himself where he could easily follow her movements with his eyes.

"It must 'a' hurt ye, Tony, fer it's somethin' uncommon."

"Yes, I've been thinking!" he continued, determined not to be put out by her jesting. "D'ye want to know what it's about?"

"Ain't at all p'ticklar!" with a flourish of the damp wiping-cloth.

"It's about you!" pausing to note the effect. "About me an' you! I've often tol' you that I intended to marry you some time. In a sort o' joke, ye know, an' you took it as a joke—but I meant it."

Dolly's face suddenly flamed, but she made no reply.

"Time's a-runnin' by, Dolly! Powerful fast, lately, it seems to me. I've had it on my mind

to say this months ago; but I couldn't. Now I'm a-goin' to. I've thought a heap o' you, Dolly, ever sence I fust saw you. How long's that been? Five or six years nearly. An' hyer the time's been a-runnin' by an' me tongue-tied, you might say, 'cept' to joke onc't in awhile."

He got up and walked over to where she stood, silent, and busying herself with nothing.

"If you'll say the word, Dolly, it can be fixed," he urged, placing his hand upon her shoulder, as he gained courage. "I've saved up enough in them five years to stock a little ranch o' our own. I love you, Dolly, more'n I kin say. If you'll promise to marry me, I'll be the happiest man in the Territory."

Dolly's face had been getting redder and redder, and her hands shook.

But when Tony slipped his arm about her waist and bent to kiss her, she bravely and smilingly turned her face to his, and answered:

"You know I love you, Tony. Why didn't you say this to me long ago?"

There was a vigorous rap on the front door, and the lovers sprung apart in laughing confusion.

Tony, with a pleased twinkle in his eyes and a strange huskiness in his voice, hurried to open it.

The visitor was Prince Primrose.

"Why, wh—what's up?" Tony stammered.

"A good deal!" said Primrose.

Dolly, hearing his voice, came running from the kitchen, and between the two Primrose was quite overwhelmed with questions, without being given a chance to reply.

"Edith has been abducted! Carried away!" he at last managed to explain. "At least she is gone, and the people at the boarding-house don't know what's become of her. I suppose she's been taken into the mountains somewhere. That was attempted once, you know. I propose to make a search of the trails leading into the mountains, and I want Tony and some others to go with me. I could have picked up men in town likely, but Tony's a practiced trailer and I must have him."

"So that's what brought me. And I want to start just as soon as I can. Get out your pony and select such men as you can trust. Jim Long will do for one. And tell the others that you're going to Paradise Gulch after a bunch of cattle."

He spoke hurriedly.

Dolly stood by, silently weeping; and Tony seemed too much astonished to move.

"Rustle around, Tony!" he again urged, taking out his watch. "We will need to be in the edge of the mountains before dark."

Then, as Tony sprung away, he told the weeping Dolly all that he knew of the affair.

Within twenty minutes Tony had selected his men, made his explanation, and they were dashing away toward Paradise Gulch, led by Primrose.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PUSHING AFFAIRS.

"YES," said Mascot, as Towsley came out of the cabin, "there's devilment afloat."

He wheeled his horse and rode to the edge of the timber, so that his words would not reach the cabin.

"What's the trouble?" questioned Towsley, who had followed him.

"Well, in the first place, Primrose is searching the entire country round about Paradise Gulch, and he has a strong force at his back. I'm not caring much for that; for it's only what I expected. But he's taken the bull by the horns, as you might say; and, over his own signature, has published us to the world, in the *Gulch Gladiator*."

He drew a newspaper from his pocket, unfolded it so that Towsley could see the glaring headlines and then handed it to him.

Towsley's face took on a sickly hue and his hands shook, as he read:

"DARING DEVILS!"

WARRANTS ISSUED FOR THEIR ARREST!

THE ABDUCTORS OF EDITH NETTLETON KNOWN.

THEY ARE MASCOT BILL LAWRENCE AND BEN TOWSLEY!

The first is the ex-foreman of the Nettleton Ranch and the other Miss Nettleton's Guardian and the Administrator of the Estate.

Their object is to hold her for Ransom and to Plunder and and Despoil the Ranch!

A PROMINENT CITIZEN IMPLICATED.

So says Kenneth Primrose, the Well-known As-sayer."

Then followed an account of the abduction, touched and garnished in reportorial style, and after it a long letter from Primrose boldly giving the names of the abductors, their motives and the events which he believed led them to the step. It contained also the statement that he had caused warrants to be issued for their arrest and that certain events tended to show that a prominent citizen of the town was implicated in the affair; and closed by assuming the entire responsibility of the issuance of the warrants, and of the charges contained in the publication.

"Ruther bold, I must say!" exclaimed Towsley, when he had read it through. "If we go

near the town, after this, I reckon we'll be nabbed by some officer and stuck in jail."

"Still, I've been in town, Towsley!" with an affected smile. "Came from there last night. Midas is almost scared to death and declares he will have nothing more to do with the thing. Was almost afraid to give me shelter. And the people of Paradise Gulch, since reading that statement, are all against us."

"As soon as I found how the wind was blowing I went to the ranch. I discovered that Primrose had visited it before me and taken away Tony Bowers and a few of the fellows that he knew he could trust. And by the way, he has had the gall to appoint Tony, foreman in my place. I suppose you noticed that the article speaks of me as 'ex-foreman.'"

"The men that were left are all faithful to our cause and I brought them away with me. There are eight of them. Four I sent to a certain point, where I intend to meet them. The other four I ordered here. I told them to come in a roundabout way and to thoroughly conceal their trail."

"They will be here soon; and I intend to leave them with you to help you defend the cabin, if it should by any chance be discovered."

"With the others I mean to gather up all the Nettleton cattle I can find on the ranges and run them out of the country. After the flurry, we can dispose of them in some way."

The words and tones had a depressing effect on Ben Towsley.

"Is it as bad as that?" he asked, with considerable anxiety.

"Oh, I don't know that we have any cause yet to be frightened. It will be simply preparing for whatever may happen. Taking time by the forelock, as you might say. Of course we'll have to let go of that court business. We'd be arrested if we went into town; and Midas, the fat coward, would be afraid to say a word or put up a dollar in our behalf."

"That leaves us with only the girl and the cattle. But we ought to do well with them. The cattle will bring something; and, if we can baffle those bloodhounds, that are trying to trail us, we can get a snug pile of ransom money."

He tried to assume a cheerful air on noticing how greatly cast down Towsley seemed to be.

"Where air they, now?"

"Primrose and his men? Beating the trails leading out of Paradise Gulch. I don't really think they can find us. But Midas says Tony Bowers is noted as a trailer, and so I thought it best to order the four men here. If you are discovered you can hold them off, I think. At least until they can bring up reinforcements. That will, no doubt, give you a chance to slip away with the girl in the darkness."

"You must hold her by all means. That is where the principal part of the swag is to come from, you know. Hello! Here are the fellows, now!"

Four horsemen had come into view on the opposite ridge, having completely circled the place before approaching it.

Catching sight of Mascot and Towsley, they dashed at quick speed down the declivity and soon joined them.

All this time Edith was consumed with curiosity and tantalized by suspense. She knew that something of importance was under discussion and that it concerned her. Vainly she strained her ears to catch a few syllables of the conversation.

When the horsemen rode down the slope she was almost frightened. It looked very much as if Mascot was expecting and preparing for a fight.

The men tethered their horses among the scrub, where they would be hidden from the view of any one on the ridges; and entered into conversation with their leaders.

The talk lasted for a half-hour. Then they approached the hut, and Mascot Bill rode away into the mountains.

"Rustle somethin' fer us to eat!" commanded Towsley, who was in an irritable mood. "The men air as hungry as wolves!"

Edith thought that, whether hungry or not, they looked very much like those animals, with their savage faces and fiery eyes. However, she only said, in her sweetest tones:

"Certainly! I will do the best I can. Our stock of provisions is running low, though. If these men are to stay long, more ought to be got."

It was a subtle attempt at gaining information.

"Likely they will. But they've brought a lot o' stuff with 'em."

Then, poking his head through the doorway—for the men had entered the hut—he bawled:

"Ef you fellers want some chuck fetch in them groceries. The cook says the grub-box is gittin' low."

The men sprung to obey the order, and in a little while the articles were piled in a heap in the center of the floor.

"There's enough to last a week, I calc'late," with a wave of his hand. "An' when it's out we kin send fer more. Yer friends won't be able to starve us, 'tany rate, whatever they do. An' ef they want to fighr, they'll likewise find that we've got considerable am'nition, an' plenty Winchesters to shoot it out of."

Then there was a probability that her friends were advancing to her rescue? The thought brought a flush to her cheeks and caused her eyes to shine like stars. The comforting reflection gave way to one of apprehension. There would be a fight, and some of them, perhaps many of them, might be killed. Primrose might even be of the number.

"Well, ain't ye goin' to cook it, now that it's brung in?"

"Oh, Mr. Towsley, won't you tell me? Are my friends in the vicinity?"

Her desire to know the truth dispelled, for an instant, her fear.

"Now, that's what I calls cool!" Towsley observed, staring at her curiously, and stroking his beard. "Cool as ice! Hows'ever, as I don't see how it kin do any harm, I'll answer ye. They're out on the peraries 'tween hyer an' the Gulch, racin' roun' from one trail to another, like a pack o' p'inter dogs. But that's all the good it will do them. They can't foller us hyer, an' ef they did they couldn't git you out o' our fingers. You'll go when they plank down the money, an' not afore."

He spoke very positively, but Edith, hoping that the bits of handkerchief and letters had not been disturbed, took courage.

She went about her task, now, in a very sprightly manner, and the weary horsemen were soon enjoying a tempting meal.

All through the day the men lounged in the grove, smoking and sleeping.

After that first meal, Towsley brought in a bundle of very dry and light wood, which he requested her to use wholly in the future. He was afraid that a dense smoke would betray their presence. The temptation to saturate this wood with water was very great, but this Edith feared to do.

At intervals Towsley ascended a rocky hill and stared off in the direction of the town. But he would not reveal to Edith the information thus gained, nor say whether he had gained any.

Thus the hours went by, and darkness descended, and no party of rescuers had yet appeared.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A DIFFICULT TRAIL.

WHEN Prince Primrose reached Paradise Gulch he was approached by a gentleman who had long been his friend and confidant. The news this gentleman brought was of an important nature, it being no less than a statement that on the night of the abduction Mascot Bill and Ben Towsley had been seen to emerge from the residence of Colonel Midas, in a skulking and sneaking way, as if they wished to avoid attention. They had not been followed, but it was safe to assume, the gentleman thought, that they had gone directly from Midas's residence to the boarding-house.

On receipt of this information, Primrose determined to make a bold movement. He had long known that Midas was a villain, and had frequently suspected him of being leagued with Mascot and Towsley. He had been led to this by his discovery of Mascot and Midas together behind the saloon screen, where the fight occurred, as detailed in an early chapter. Now he was convinced that his suspicions were correct.

After instructing Tony Bowers to look up a number of trusty men, he went directly to Midas's residence, and gave the knocker a pull that was imperative and almost fierce.

Midas responded in person, looking very sleek and comfortable in dressing-gown and slippers.

"I want to speak to you in private on a matter of importance," said Primrose, eying him coldly.

"Why, yes; certainly!" with a little, nervous start. "Step this way, please."

"Now, what can I do for you?" as he bowed him into the cozy sitting-room.

"Colonel Midas," exclaimed Primrose, "I am a man of few words, and not given to subterfuge."

This was an ominous beginning, and the fat colonel almost trembled.

"Edith Nettleton has been abducted from her boarding-house. The crime was committed by Mascot Bill Lawrence and Ben Towsley, men with whom you are well acquainted. They came here to your house, where they remained concealed until night. Then they sneaked away from here, gained the young lady's room and carried her off!"

Midas was white and shaky, and intensely astounded.

"Why—why—the charge is preposterous!" he stammered. "I have understood that the young lady is missing. Towsley and Mascot may have abducted her, though I don't believe it. But, as for them being here in my house, at any time recently, it is false, sir! Wholly and maliciously false!"

"And not only were they given refuge by you," Primrose continued, without noticing the denial, "but you are leagued with them in the affair, and know where they are at this moment."

"It's false, I tell you!" purpling and swelling.

"Who are you to come here, into my own

house, and make such charges against me? I will have you arrested, sir! I will—"

"Just what I hope you will do, Midas. Though I know you won't. Then the facts would become public property. If you want to greatly oblige me, you will call in an officer!"

He stopped and surveyed the fuming man with clear, scornful eyes.

"I thought you wouldn't care to," with a hard laugh, "even to oblige so good a friend as I am! Your denials don't deceive me, in the least. You are leagued with those fellows, and I know it. The fact has been traced home to you."

"Now, what I want you to do, and what you shall do, is to tell me where they are!"

"I don't know anything about it!" Midas again protested. "You are mistaken, Mr. Primrose, in thinking that I do."

His bellowing tones had dropped to a whine and his manner was, now, cringing.

"I intend to publish an account of the affair in to-morrow's *Gladiator*; and in it I shall make bold statements. If I can't gain access to the *Gladiator's* columns I shall distribute the article through the town in hand-bills. And I shall call a spade a spade and name the men who are into this thing. If you don't want your guilt published to the world in that article, you must tell the truth!"

Midas was crushed by the threat. The editor of the *Gladiator* was a reckless man and an enemy of his, and he knew that he could not prevail on him to suppress the account, if it was written and handed in by such a man as Primrose.

"I have told the truth!" he whimpered. "I don't know where they are!"

"And do you deny all knowledge of the affair? Were not the men here in your house on the night of the abduction?"

"Oh, my God, Primrose! Have you no mercy? Do you intend to crush me to the wall because appearances are against me?"

"Not at all! If you speak the truth. That's the only condition on which I will spare you!"

"If I tell the truth, Primrose, will you suppress my name in connection with what I say?"

The question was an almost tearful appeal.

"Yes! I will not mention your name."

"Then I will tell you what I know, and all I know. I see I must do it, to set myself right. Those men were here; but I did not know they intended to abduct Miss Nettleton. Indeed I did not. I thought it was some one else. They didn't take me into their confidence. And—and I was afraid to refuse them shelter; for, you know, I have been on too intimate terms with them. They possess some secrets by which they could injure me. And so—and so—"

"You're lying! You knew what they intended to do. But that doesn't matter; and I'll let it pass. What I want to know is where they are now!"

"I couldn't tell you that, Primrose, if I was to be hung for it."

"Then your name goes in the paper!"

"Have some mercy, Primrose!" wailed the unhappy man. "I was lying awhile ago, I might as well own it. But this is the truth. As I live, it is! I don't know where they are any more than you do, only that it's somewhere in the mountains."

"A big place that! Don't you think you could remember it, if you'd try real hard? You've confessed to one or two lies already. Confess to this."

"Indeed I'd tell you, if I knew!" Midas protested. "Oh, God! I wish I did. I'd tell you all. But I can't! I can't!"

Primrose saw that the trembling wretch was at last speaking the truth.

"Well, then, I'll go and find them. I'll not put your name in the papers. But I'll hint that there's a certain prominent man who had better leave the town. If you're wise, you'll take the hint. I give you this warning because you have confessed what you have."

He took up his hat and departed without ceremony, leaving Midas quaking and gasping, like the despicable and guilty creature that he was.

"He'll never tell them of that meeting!" Primrose muttered. "He'll be afraid to!" And events proved that in this Primrose was right.

Night was at hand; and nothing could now be done toward finding the trail. So he instructed Tony to go into camp, with his men, on the outskirts of the town and await the coming of day.

That night Primrose wrote the article which appeared the next day in the *Gladiator*. He also visited the police judge and got out warrants for the arrest of Mascot and Towsley; and had a conference with his lawyer in regard to the will case, which was now pending and would soon come up for trial. Altogether it was a night of hard work and little rest.

At the first break of dawn he was at the camp of the cowboys.

"Now, my lads, we've got a big job and a difficult one ahead of us!" he said, when he had returned their greetings. "But I know I can trust you to do your utmost. It won't do to go about this in a hap-hazard way. There are

a dozen or more trails leading out of the Gulch. Those scoundrels, without any doubt, followed one of those trails. It would be the safest thing for them to do.

"My plan is for us to separate and go in squads of only two each, each squad taking a different trail. We'll cover the ground quicker in that way. Search the trails for at least ten miles out, and at night report at the twin peaks, three or four miles north of town. If at any time you discover 'sign,' break across to the next trail—one man to the trail on each side of you—have them do the same and gather every man at the twin peaks as soon as you can. Is the plan perfectly clear?"

"It is!" replied Tony, acting as spokesman.

"Then scatter, two and two, and do your best. Tony will come with me."

In a little while the trailers had paired off and were riding carefully over at least half the trails that radiated from Paradise Gulch like the spokes of a wheel.

"I think we'd better take the trail that leads toward the Blue Bonnet!" Primrose suggested. "I've always had an idea that the fellow who followed me that night was one of Mascot's sneaks; and perhaps their hiding-place is out that way somewhere."

The opinion was erroneous, as they discovered after more than a half-day's laborious searching. Not a sign could they detect anywhere.

That night they rendezvoused at the twin peaks, and the next morning took the trail leading at right-angles to the first.

As they were riding slowly along this, late in the evening, Tony's quick eye detected a bit of white cloth, which had lodged on the sharp spines of a cactus. He plucked it from the spines and scrutinized it closely.

"If that ain't a piece of Miss Edith's handkercher, then I'm a nigger!" was his enthusiastic exclamation.

"I believe you're correct!" rejoined Primrose. "It's a bit of handkerchief, and a lady's handkerchief, at that. Then we're on the right track!"

"You bet!" with a pleased chuckle. "She's tore that off an' throwed it there a-purpose. We'll find more furdur on. Hooray!"

He was right in the surmise, for a ride of about a mile revealed another. No more were found, the rest having been carried off by the wind. But they discovered the point where the three ponies left the main trail; and, in the tall grass near, some of the slips that Edith had torn from the letters.

"There can be no question about it now!" asserted Primrose, his face shining. "But night is at hand and we can't do much more. However, follow the trail as long as you can see. I am going back after the men. We'll camp on the trail to-night, if we can do no more."

He rode away toward the place of meeting without another word, knowing that so keen a trailer as Tony needed no instructions.

Before he was out of sight Tony had tethered his pony in a clump of bushes and was advancing on foot at a quick, but cautious run.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE STRUGGLE AT THE HUT.

It was sundown when Tony struck the broken and rocky country, but there was enough light for his keen eyes, and a bit of torn paper here and there aided him wonderfully. He ran tirelessly along, like an Indian trailer, his eyes fixed on the ground.

When he gained the top of the ridge there was barely enough light for him to distinguish the little grove nestling far down in the hollow. But not a sign of life, human or animal, could he discern. Neither did he see the brown gable of the hut, because of the semi-loom.

"A likely place for a camp!" he soliloquized. "It's too dark to trail any longer, an' I'll jist creep down an' see if there's anything there."

The growing darkness, which had annoyed him, was now his friendly aid, for it screened him from the eyes of the watchers below.

His movements, as he slowly and cautiously worked his way forward, were as lithe and sinuous as those of any Apache. He did not know that there was a soul within the little grove, yet he was as alert and watchful as if creeping on the outposts of an army.

By easy gradients he descended, and at length lay crouching and listening beneath the very shadows of the trees.

He was about to continue to advance when the stamping of a pony's foot warned him into silence, and he sunk to the ground like a disappearing phantom.

"Where there's horses there's likely to be humans!" he muttered, and crawled forward on his hands and knees.

"Soon the hum of voices in low conversation reached him, and he knew that he was nigh a camp. He drew near enough to discover that the men were, as he suspected, some of his old acquaintances from the ranch. Then he saw the dark outline of the hut.

Circling the camp, he approached this hut, and soon had an ear pressed against the chinks in the log wall.

Towsley was talking to Edith, and at intervals Edith was replying.

Tony could scarcely repress a yell of delight. For several minutes he lay there, wondering if he could not, single-handed, break into the cabin and rescue her. On reflection he decided that it was too risky. He would probably succeed in getting shot, and then the scoundrels would abandon the hut and carry Edith with them.

Having learned all that he could, he worked his way out the grove and up the hill, in the same slow and cautious manner. Not until he had crossed the ridge did he venture to rise to his feet.

"We've got 'em!" he soliloquized, as he swung hopefully along on the backward trail. "Rounded up like cattle! If we don't cut the young lady out o' that bunch o' no-count mavericks, then I'm a sheep-herder!"

Primrose had not yet returned to the place where Tony had tethered the pony, so the cowboy, wishing to share his good news, mounted and rode back over the beaten trail.

It was now well on toward midnight, for the visit to the grove had occupied several hours, and Tony knew that Primrose and his followers could not be far away. He met them after a ride of about a mile.

"I suppose we had better make the advance to-night, under cover of the darkness," said Primrose, questioningly, after hearing Tony's account of his discovery. "They may take it into their heads to move."

"I don't 'low they'll do that. But I think we'd better go right on. Leave the horses hwer some'eres in the scrub an' advance on foot. We kin crawl right into the grove, an' them be none the wiser, if we work it right."

The advice seemed good, and, after reaching the junction of the trails, the men dismounted and tied their ponies beneath some low-growing trees, where they would be well-sheltered from view. Then, under the guidance of Tony, they proceeded on foot.

They traveled at quite a lively gait until the nearness of the frowning ridge warned them into moderation.

From the top of the ridge they could look off into the basin that held in its depths the grove, like an emerald in a shallow, brown bowl. But they could see nothing, save the fathomless darkness, and could hear nothing but the light wind singing among the rocks.

With patient carefulness they began the descent, moving so lightly that scarcely a pebble was disturbed. Tony's knowledge of the way was invaluable; and after almost two hours of creeping and crawling, they drew near to the grove.

Then came the most difficult part: entering it, among the brush and scrub, and over fallen and decayed branches, without sending a note of warning to their unsuspecting and self-satisfied foes. It was perilous, as well as difficult.

Should the guards be aroused, a shower of balls would hurtle among them; and Towsley's men would either make their escape with Edith, or seek shelter behind the strong walls of the hut, from which it would be impossible to dislodge them without great loss of life. In their desperation they might even murder the girl.

"Try to creep in between the camp and the hut!" whispered Primrose. "If you cannot do that, gain a position where we can command the doors of the hut and the open space with our rifles."

In obedience to this, Tony circled the camp, the men following and imitating his movements. It was a process tedious and wearisome to exasperation. But it brought them finally to a point where they could plainly see the hut, with its barred doors.

Then Primrose sent a portion of the men further around, where they could command the north door, and where their shots would act as a cross-fire.

"It's two hours to dawn!" he whispered to Tony, who was lying by him. "Would you charge now, or wait for daylight?"

In matters of physical warfare he trusted almost wholly to the judgment of the cowboy, who, he knew from experience, rarely erred.

"I'd wait fer day, if I was doin' the orderin'." The doors is barred, and may be hard to break down. Then they may be some o' the scamps inside. Ye know I heerd Towsley, an' they may be others. If we wait fer day some o' 'em will open the doors an' come out. Then'll be our time. We kin take it with a rush an' a jump!"

"Very well, then; we'll wait. I think you're right. Pass the word to the men, so that they'll know how to act when the time comes."

Tony slipped away as noiselessly as a shadow. The silence was so deep that Primrose could easily have imagined himself alone beneath those waving branches. The squeal and kick of a horse occasionally broke on the night air. That was all. Not a sound of human life.

"And some of them may be sleeping their last sleep," he thought. "No doubt they are, for there will be a fight in the morning. Poor fellows! I'm sorry for them, even if they are engaged in a bad cause. And some of us may already have taken our last slumber. It's a queer world; take it as you will. Death treads

so constantly on the heels of Life that we forget his presence and how narrow is our span!"

These reflections were interrupted by the return of Tony, who glided back in the same sinuous way in which he had departed.

"I'd think they'd gone, if 'twasn't fer the hosses, everything's so still!" he whispered. "But they wouldn't be apt to go away 'thout them."

"No! They're asleep, I suppose, with the exception, possibly, of a sentinel or two. It's the time of night, or rather morning, when one sleeps the soundest. They'll be lively enough to give us plenty of trouble after awhile, I've an idea. I'm so sleepy myself that I don't believe I could hold my eyes open, if it wasn't for the responsibility and excitement."

Then they relaxed into a silence so deep that the ticking of the watch in Primrose's pocket sounded with almost startling distinctness.

Slowly the gray dawn spread over the eastern sky. Minute by minute it increased, expanded and brightened. A dull wraith of fog wrapped the tips of the peaks. Then Day slowly ascended on the flaming pathway which the sun hoisted heavenward.

There was a stir in the camp of the enemy. Men's forms arose and staggered about among the stamping ponies like ill-defined and uncertain ghosts.

"Ready!" whispered Primrose, his voice trembling with the importance of the moment. "Pass the word to the man next you. Ready!"

"Ay! Ready!" repeated Tony, like an exhausted echo.

A low shiver of clicking gun-locks crept along the leaves that were lifting with the inspiring breath of the morning air.

A stir came from within the hut, and a log arose in front of one of the doors and assumed the shape of a man. The log was Ben Towsley, who had slept on the earth, with his body stretched across that entrance to the hut.

He yawned, drew his limbs into shape, and proceeded, with slow deliberation to take down the heavy bars. Then he pushed the door inward with one heavy foot, and entered.

"Keep cool!" cautioned Primrose, for the men, in their excitement, were fingering their weapons and breathing heavily. "He will come out again, and then we'll nab him!"

One man, however, disregarding the warning, incautiously lifted his head above the bushes to get a better view. It was a fatal movement. The head was seen by one of Towsley's men in the timber, and the next moment a rifle ball crashed through it.

Moved by a common impulse, and without waiting for orders, Primrose's men leaped from their concealment and bounded toward the hut. As they advanced they heard an oath and a shriek, and the heavy door flew to with a bang.

Another bullet came hurtling through the timber, and with hideous yells the men from among the ponies charged, firing as they came.

But there were only four of them, and Primrose's force outnumbered them two to one. Seeing this, they darted back into the timber, and ran for the ponies. But the one who had fired that first murderous shot, the only shot that did execution, was cut down by a Winchester ball as he ran. The others gained their ponies and escaped.

"Surrender, Ben Towsley!" shouted Primrose. "You cannot escape us."

There was no reply, but a scream and a movement was heard at the opposite side of the room.

With quick intuition Tony darted around the house in time to see the door fly open and Ben Towsley emerge, holding the half-fainting form of Edith before him as a shield.

It seemed impossible to fire at the moving scoundrel without endangering the life of the girl.

"Drap her!" yelled Tony.

Then, as Towsley bounded away without heeding the command, the cowboy's revolver glinted in the new sunlight, and, at its report, Towsley tumbled heavily to the ground.

By one of those almost impossible shots which had given him the title of "The Pistol King," Tony had broken the villain's neck.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GOLD EXCITEMENT.

EDITH NETTLETON slipped from Towsley's arms in a dead faint.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying on the little, pallet-like bed in the hut, and Prince Primrose and Tony Bowers were bending anxiously over her. She shuddered as she looked up and recalled the events of the past few minutes.

"Thank Heaven you are safe! You were not injured by the fall?"

There was a look of unfathomable devotion in Primrose's eyes as he said it.

"Quite unharmed!" she replied, wondering at the look, then flushing as an inkling of its meaning came to her. "If you will assist me to my feet, I am sure I will feel all right."

But for some moments after rising she could scarcely walk, because of dizziness and a sickening sense of horror at what had transpired.

Primrose went out, leaving her with Tony, and a little later she heard him giving orders for the burial of the dead.

In her flurry and confusion she had not thought to even thank him for her rescue. She recalled the fact with a sense of shame; and forthwith proceeded to load Tony with a profusion of gratitude. But when Primrose came in again, the words that she had conned over for use in expressing her gratefulness, fled; and she broke down in her attempt to tell him how glad she was that he had come to her relief.

But broken as they were, the sentences touched Primrose in his most vulnerable part; and there were tears in his voice, as well as in his eyes, as he hurried away on some pretended errand to hide his emotion.

The burial was so quiet an affair that she did not know when it took place. But when, after an hour or two, Primrose had a pony, with her saddle on it, brought to the door, and she came out to mount it, she saw some heaps of yellow earth among the interstices of the trees, and knew that beneath one of them rested all that was mortal of her late captor, Ben Towsley.

"We are ready!" Primrose announced, coming up at that moment.

She was ready also, and they rode away from the place with scarcely a backward glance, and with a thoughtful and grave silence.

From the crest of the ridge Edith turned and took a last survey of the encircling hills, and of the little grave which they shielded. Then they went on again, turning their faces from the dead to the living before them.

It was mid-afternoon when they reached Paradise Gulch, and the story of the fight and of Edith's rescue spread through the town like wild-fire. It grew as it spread, until at least one-half of the population believed that Primrose's men had met and defeated a force twice or thrice their number.

Tony's feat with the revolver was commented on and repeated, until that worthy grew absolutely disgusted.

"Never see sich a pack o' fools!" he declared to Primrose, as he extricated himself from a crowd of admirers. "I do b'lieve if I'd manage to hit a barn door they'd think 'twas fine shootin'."

"Did anything new happen while we were away?" asked Primrose, not heeding the complaint.

"Yes; I heard that Colonel Midas had skipped the town. Went away las' night; nobody knows where."

Primrose hastened to make inquiries and found that the report was true. Midas had sold his property at a ruinous price and with the little it brought him had fled from Paradise Gulch. The people wondered why the jovial colonel had done so and many dark hints were made. The truth finally came out, and those who had befriended him for his money's sake were among the first to execrate and denounce him.

And thus, as a character, he drops out of this story. And, two years afterward, he dropped as suddenly out of life. He was shot in a gambling den, in a quarrel over a game of cards, in one of the wild mountain towns of Silverland.

Edith was received by the inmates of the boarding-house as one risen from the dead. And there, to her great surprise, she found Dolly Dimple.

"I couldn't stay out there any longer," Dolly explained, "because, miss—because o' the—the ghost. I seen it myself after Tony left."

The look of pain that swept over Edith's face alarmed her.

"There! I'm a fool; that's what I am! But indeed, Miss Edith, I was left alone, you know, and I got that lonesome I couldn't live. Primrose come and took Tony an' some o' the men; and Mascot Bill he come and took the rest. An' there I was, without a livin' creeter, you might say—fer the cows an' ponies on the range don't count. An' I couldn't stand it."

"So I come to town. An' after huntin' round awhile I found you'd been stayin' hyer; an' hyer I come an' hyer I've been ever sence."

She hurried along in her statement, anxious to make Edith forget the torturing thoughts and memories connected with those mysterious appearances.

"You did right," replied Edith, with an approving smile. "Of course you couldn't be expected to stay there alone."

Then she turned the talk into a new channel, to Dolly's great delight.

Primrose found that the account of the fight and rescue was not the only thing that was agitating the minds of the people of Paradise Gulch. Many of them were almost wild over the wonderful output of the now famous Blue Bonnet Mine. Congratulations were showered upon him on every hand, for all believed that he was its discoverer and owner. He scarcely knew whether to be pained or pleased as one acquaintance after another took him by the hand and pronounced him "a lucky dog."

He learned that the sides of the canyon and the hills about it had become the site of as excited and seething a camp of gold-hunters as ever went crazy over a promise of the yellow metal. Claim-signs were as thick as flowers in spring-time, and hundreds of shafts were being

sunk, right and left, all about the first one and as near to it as they dared to venture.

On going to his office he found a gentleman standing in front of it, patiently awaiting his coming. He was a shrewd, keen-eyed, business-looking man and Primrose at once put him down as a would-be purchaser.

"Primrose, I believe?" he questioned. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Primrose!"

Primrose returned the greeting, swung open the office-door, and invited him in.

He complied with alacrity and extended a card bearing the name; PHILIP RAFAEL!

"What can I do for you, Mr. Rafael?" Primrose queried. "From your manner I judge you have called in relation to some business affair."

"I thought, probably, you might wish to sell the Blue Bonnet Mine!" replied Rafael, pulling at his heavy mustache with white and nervous fingers. "If so, I am ready to make you an offer. It is developing into a good piece of property, as, of course, you know. If you do not wish to sell the whole I thought it likely you might desire to dispose of an interest."

"It is not for sale!" Primrose declared, the lines about his mouth hardening. "At least, not now."

"Oh, come!" urged Rafael. "Everything has its price. Name it. Then I will see what I can do."

Someway the offer irritated Primrose. The flood of congratulations had, also, begun to affect him in the same way. He was placed in a false light before the world. He had not a dollar's interest in the mine, except for money advanced to work it, and yet he hesitated to say so. He would not say so until he had consulted with Edith.

"It's impossible!" he declared. "The mine is not now for sale."

"Forty thousand?" questioned Rafael, temptingly. "Fifty thousand, then! That is a big sum, Mr. Primrose, for a hole in the ground, even if it does contain gold ore. But I'll give it. Fifty thousand! Think over it twice, before you answer."

"I tell you I can't sell it, now!" Primrose cried, flushing.

"Say sixty thousand! But I'll not go a cent beyond that. The risk is too big. The vein may play out in twenty-four hours."

Rafael again pulled nervously at his brown mustache.

"No! Not for a hundred thousand. That is, not to-day! But if you'll call again in the morning I may be able to do something. There is another party with whom I must consult."

Rafael thought he was fighting for a higher price.

"I can't give you over sixty thousand! That's really more than it's worth."

"Call to-morrow! Call to-morrow!" exclaimed Primrose, rising. "Then I'll talk to you."

Seeing that he could gain nothing by importunity Rafael took up his shiny silk hat and departed, leaving Primrose in the depths of a bitter melancholy.

"What's to be the end of this, I wonder?" he brooded. "My ruin, no doubt! I can't remain here and see her soaring above me on gilded, butterfly wings, forgetful almost of my existence. And that's what it will result in! And then, perhaps, see her married to some of these millionaire silver-kings! I wouldn't care, maybe, if they were good enough. But there's not one of them all fit to sit in her presence."

He buried his face in his hands and became lost in gloomy thought.

"Yes; I will stand by her to the extent of my abilities, until—until she no longer needs me. Then I will turn my key forever in this little shop and go out again among strangers."

He arose, locked the office, dropped the key into his pocket, and went in search of Tony, to whom he wished to give some instructions.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A STUBBORN FIGHT.

HE found the redoubtable cowboy hovering about a livery stable a block or so from the boarding-house. Tony knew where Dolly was stopping, and had started out to call on her. But when he got that far his couraged failed him. He could not run the gantlet of the bright eyes of the female boarders.

A guilty flush mantled his bronzed cheeks when Primrose discovered and bailed him.

"I've been hunting for you about all over town!" exclaimed Primrose, shrewdly suspecting what had brought Tony to the place, and, therefore, avoiding questions. "I want you for another little piece of work. I hope you're not too nearly worn out to listen. I must confess, though, that I haven't hardly enough strength left to talk."

"Among the other things I learned since coming in, is that there's a rumor afloat to the effect that Mascot Bill is out on the ranges somewhere with a party of cowboys. No one seems to know what he is doing there. It is surmised that he has probably gathered the cowboys to resist arrest, should an attempt be made in that direction."

"Now, I don't think that is it, at all. He can't have heard yet, of the capture of the hut; and if his object is to evade arrest he would

conceal himself in the mountains or leave the country."

"K'rect!" asserted Tony, speaking for the first time.

"My idea is," Primrose continued, "that he is gathering up as many of the cattle as he can, with the intention of disposing of them somewhere and pocketing the proceeds. He might have to run them into Old Mexico to do it, but a man like him does not stop for difficulties when there's money in view."

"The skunk!" cried Tony, disgusted with the thought, "that any man should stoop to so mean a trick. 'Hoss-stealin' would be honorable!"

"I may be wrong of course! I hope I am. But my judgment tells me that's what he's up to."

"Now, I came here to ask you to get a number of gritty men, men that will fight and who are well-mounted and armed, and look into the thing. You don't need any instructions. Find out where rumor says he is and, as soon as you have had some rest, go for him!"

"That I will!" Tony exclaimed, leaping into his deep saddle and spurring the pony up the street.

He was not as worn and weary as was Primrose, who, during the past two nights had had scarcely a wink of sleep. Tony was as hardy as the shaggy ponies he so much loved and with muscles as tense and as able to endure strain as the strands of his own *riata*.

He regretted that he had not seen and spoken to Dolly. But he cast the regret behind him, and at once commenced gathering and selecting his men.

Within the hour he had them drawn up on the plain below the town and was communicating his wishes to them in words that were very vigorous, if they were not polished.

Then they dashed away into the open country that lay to the southward of the great mountains.

While selecting his men Tony had diligently gathered every scrap of information bearing upon the whereabouts of Mascot Bill and his followers. There was plenty of rumor, but the facts were meager enough. From them, however, he judged that Mascot Bill was rounding-up the cattle in a certain district to the southwest, through which passed a wide, grassy valley, where the cattle were likely to be in large numbers at that time of year.

Tony wondered if Mascot would take the trouble to cut out the Nettleton cattle from the other brands.

"Course he won't," was his mental answer, "fer he's a gran' scoundrel! An' besides, that 'u'd take time."

He never questioned the correctness of Primrose's conclusions, that Mascot was endeavoring to run the Nettleton cattle out of the country.

They went into camp that night at a water-hole in the bed of a dry creek that came down from the mountains. The next morning before it was fairly light, they were again on their way.

By noon they reached the valley where they expected to find Mascot. He was not there, and the cattle were gone from the surrounding plains, with the exception of a few that were not in traveling condition.

Tony was convinced that Mascot had driven them away, and his anger was hot.

Pressing forward, they crossed the stream; and, by separating and riding in ever-widening circles, they came at last to the point where the cattle had been "bunched." From that the trail led, like a wide roadway, toward the south.

"Headin' fer Mexico!" Tony declared. "An' they were hyer this mornin'. If we'd on'y been hyer a leetle sooner!"

The afternoon was waning; but they pressed on at the best gait they could get out of their weary ponies. They did not halt with the approach of night. When it grew too dark to see the trail, Tony led the advance and kept them in the right course by dismounting at short intervals and feeling out the hoof-prints with his fingers.

Just before midnight they went into camp for two hours; after which they pushed on again.

"He's crowdin' the critters scand'lous hard!" declared Tony, who had all of a cowboy's love for the cattle of his employer. "I ought to shoot him fer that. I judge frum it that he's afeard he'll be follered."

Just before dawn the freshness of the tracks, with other unmistakable evidence, told Tony that they were close upon the herd. He, thereupon, gave the order to halt.

"There's a water-hole about a mile ahead!" he explained. "I was at it onc't and I believe I kin now smell the water in the air. An' see how the ponies stick out their noses in that longin' way."

"I think Mascot Bill is at that water-hole, an' I'm goin' down to see. Stay hyer tell I come back."

He slipped from the saddle and disappeared in the darkness on foot.

Day broke, as he returned.

"They're there!" he whispered, coming in at a run. "An' they're preparin' to move. It's

further'n I thought to the water-hole. Two miles, anyhow! They'll be travelin' before we kin reach 'em."

The cowboys swung their bats and gave an almost voiceless cheer. Then they looked to their revolvers, touched their ponies and dashed away over the grassy plain.

As the light increased, they saw before them, a closely-packed herd of four or five hundred cattle, driven by eight men. One of the eight was Mascot Bill. They could tell him by his floating scarf and by the buttons that flashed on his Mexican jacket.

They were discovered at almost the same instant.

One of Mascot's men went on after the herd and the others prepared to give battle. This they did by forming their ponies in a circle, making a sort of living fortification, above which gleamed their rifles.

Tony was somewhat surprised at this, and at the fact that Mascot had seven followers. It was a greater force than he had expected to encounter. His own party only numbered ten, including himself.

However, he showed no hesitation; and, when near enough, ordered a charge.

It was a wild, Cossack-like rush, with glistening revolvers instead of swords and lances. Half of the ponies forming the barricade went down under the deadly fire. And of Tony's force, two ponies were slain and a saddle emptied.

Mascot Bill's men dropped to the ground behind the bodies of the dead and dying ponies and sent such a shower of balls hurtling among Tony's followers that they retreated in confusion, leaving another dead man on the plain.

Tony was wild with rage. Reforming his little band he charged again and again, forcing his way at last over the bodies of the ponies and meeting Mascot's men hand to hand.

Mascot, with blazing eyes and the mien of a devil, fought in the midst of his followers, a very Titan of destruction. With a wild yell Tony rushed at him, struck the clubbed Winchester from his hand and closed with him.

Mascot was by far the more powerful, but Tony was as slippery and sinuous as a serpent.

With a bear-like crush Mascot finally drew his foe to his breast, unsheathed his deadly knife and poised it for a blow. For an instant it hung suspended.

Then the butt of a revolver fell on his head and he dropped senseless.

One of Tony's cowboys had dealt the saving blow.

The struggle was ended.

Three of Mascot's men were dead. The others, with Mascot, were prisoners. Only one man escaped; and he was the one that had gone on with the cattle. When he saw how the conflict was likely to end, he abandoned the cattle and fled for his life.

Tony lost only two men, those slain in the first charge. But there were others who were severely and even dangerously wounded.

The victory was purchased at great cost.

It was several days before Tony and the remnant of his gallant band reached Paradise Gulch. They brought with them their wounded and the prisoners.

The cattle were driven again to the valley range and there left for the season.

"You have done nobly!" exclaimed Primrose, taking the brave cowboy by the hand. "No one could have done better!"

And those words, so heartily spoken, amply repaid Tony for all the toil and peril he had undergone.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LASSOING A GHOST.

FOR fifteen hours after his return, Tony Bowers was not seen, and it is safe to assume that he spent the entire time in rest and slumber. Then he reappeared, revived and rejuvenated.

On learning that Dolly had summoned courage to return to the ranch, he expressed a desire to do likewise.

"As foreman, you know, it's my duty to," he said apologetically to Primrose. "There's some work to be done, and I'll take Jim Long an' two two er three others with me. That will be a-plenty fer the time o' year."

He hesitated, as if waiting for Primrose's consent.

"Why, certainly! Go, by all means. That's your place of duty now, and Dolly will be lonesome, no doubt, there by herself."

A sly twinkle came into Primrose's eyes.

Tony colored, and was on the point of turning away.

"You mustn't forget the trial, though. It will be called in about a week. You and the men who were with you, will be needed as witnesses."

Mascot Bill had been lodged in the stout, stone jail to which Paradise Gulch consigned its law-breakers, and was to be tried soon, as Primrose stated, for his crimes.

After leaving Primrose, Tony was not long in gaining the open country that stretched away toward the Nettleton Ranch.

His pony was fresh, and although it was then

considerably past noon, the wiry little animal placed the miles behind it with such sturdy vigor, that Tony reached the place by sundown.

Jim Long and the cowboys followed later, not being in such a hurry, and did not get in until some time after dark.

Dolly espied him while he was yet a great way off, and was standing in the door to give him welcome as he rode up. Her cheeks were flushed with pleasure, and she readily yielded him a kiss, when, with uncommon boldness, he asked for one.

"Yes, Dolly, I'm glad to see you!" he exclaimed, for the half-dozen time. "Plagued if I ain't! I ain't had you out o' my mind, fer a minute hardly, sence I saw you last. An' you're a-gittin' purtier ever' day, I do believe!"

"You're a flatterer, Tony, anyway!" coloring with embarrassment and pleasure. "I s'pose you thought o' me all the time you was doin' that fightin'?"

"That's what made me fight so!" he answered, naively. "I knowed it jist wouldn't do to git killed and leave you a widder, as one might say, before you was ever married. No; that wouldn't do at all! An' so we fit an' fit untell we downed 'em."

"An' now, if you've some coffee ready and a bite, I'll be obleeged."

They were in readiness, as he had expected; for Dolly knew how to attend to the wants of the inner man.

"As I was a-sayin', Dolly," he broke in, flourishing his fork, "I've saved up enough to git a purty good bunch o' cattle an' start us in the ranch business."

He had, for the moment, forgotten the lapse of time, since last he spoke to her of love and marriage.

"Yes!" she replied, casting down her eyes demurely.

"An' I think that the sooner we git married the better."

She did not reply this time, but lowered her eyes still further, and until they rested on the toe of one shoe which had crept from beneath her dress.

"What d'ye say to next week?" Tony questioned, draining the coffee-cup to hide his eagerness.

"You air foreman, hyer, Tony. You couldn't quit 'thout givin' notice."

"That's so! Blamed if I didn't fergit that. Then there's that trail, an' a dozen other things to take up my time. Say two weeks then!"

She was painfully silent; and when he had finished his supper, he kissed her again, knowing that that silence meant consent.

Then he went out to look over the place and attend to the wants of his pony, leaving her to her own sweet imaginings.

When he returned it was dark.

Dolly was preparing supper for the expected cowboys; and Tony found supreme happiness in following her admiringly, yet respectfully, with his eyes.

In the course of an hour Jim Long arrived with the cowboys. As a special favor Tony invited them into the house and a bountiful supper was served in the roomy kitchen.

"Give them ponies an extra feed o' hay in honor o' the return!" yelled Long. "I ain't been feelin' so good in a year."

Tony felt like echoing the sentiment, but was constrained by a fear of attracting a fire of jovial banter.

"He ought to be thankful that you got back alive!" Dolly ventured, with much earnestness.

"We air!" replied Long. "We ain't overly better er more religious'n we ort to be; but this I'll say: We're thankful to Him as kep' us in the holler of His hand. Ef he hadn't, Dolly, the clay would have been over our breasts this night, I'm thinkin'!"

These words, from such a man as Long, brought a solemn and thoughtful hush that was scarcely broken when they arose from the table.

But their gaiety returned to them on reaching the bunk-house, and they proceeded to fill the night with songs and innocent hilarity.

While the fun was at its highest a quiet step was heard in the yard, near the front door.

Tony was sitting with Dolly in the large room that opened into the hall leading to this door.

"What was that?" whispered Tony. "Seems like I heered some one walkin', low an' easy like."

Dolly became deathly pale, and clung to him with a trembling hand.

"It's the ghost," she whispered. "I 'most know it is. It come that way while you was gone. It shoved open the door and walked through the hall, pat, pat, just like you hear it now. That's the reason I left hyer an' went to Paradise Gulch."

Her terror was so great that her words were almost inarticulate.

Tony shrunk in fright. But he recalled his boast, that if the ghost ever came near him again he would rope it. His *riata* was in his quivering hand, but he seemed glued to the chair.

The roaring songs of the cowboys acted some-

what as a bracing stimulant, and he partially arose, only to sink back again.

Dolly was terribly frightened, and seemed on the point of shrieking. The front door was visible from where they sat, and her eyes were drawn to it as if by some species of fearful fascination.

"I'll do it," muttered Tony, grimly, again essaying to rise, as the steps sounded nearer. "If it comes anigh me."

He staggered to his feet this time and clutched the snaky rope.

At the same instant the door was pushed gently open, and the apparition entered. The lamplight streaming over it showed the masses of long hair and the general outline of the form. The face was partially turned away.

With a mighty effort and a sort of gurgling cry Tony hurled the rope. The rope settled fairly about the shoulders of the gruesome thing. With a sort of blind and frenzied instinct the cowboy pulled heavily in, and the ghost fell, struggling and moaning, to the floor.

Tony was for the moment paralyzed, and Dolly sent up a series of the most frantic and ear-piercing screams that mortal ever heard.

With a chorus of wild cries the cowboys bounded from the bunk-rooms and ran for the house. In through the kitchen bounded Long, with drawn revolver, the others following.

Dolly was still shrieking, Tony seemed on the point of fainting, while the figure on the hall-floor lay limp and apparently lifeless.

Long stooped, partially lifted it, and turned its face to the light, only to let it fall back again.

"My God!" he cried. "It's the ranch king himself!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

THE next moment Waxy Joe bounded in from the darkness, wild-eyed and trembling.

"Oh, you've killed him!" he cried, casting himself on the seemingly inanimate form. "That's what I've been afeard of. I knowed you would!"

He gave vent to his grief in a prolonged howl.

That howl aroused Tony's benumbed faculties. It convinced him that Waxy Joe, at least, was not a ghost.

"What's the meanin' o' this hyer, Waxy?" he demanded, striding forward.

The youth arose and glared about.

"Where's Mascot?" he cried. "He killed him. I knowed he would!"

"Come! What's the matter with you?" demanded Long, giving him a shake. "Nobody's killed n.thin!"

One of the cowboys, more thoughtful than the others, or perhaps less scared, had darted away, and now returned with a pail of water.

Kneeling by the side of the prostrate man he began to attempt his restoration. This brought his comrades to their senses. Tony and Dolly also seemed to find their wits and lent their aid.

For a time Waxy Joe was forgotten. It was clear that Jacob Nettleton was still a living man, and not a disembodied spirit. It almost surpassed belief. But in the fear lest he should again slip from them they forgot their wonder and questionings and devoted themselves to bringing him out of his swoon.

Their efforts were finally rewarded. The breast heaved, the eyelids fluttered, and the ranch king came back to life and consciousness. The light in his eyes was clear, but he was evidently mystified. He seemed not to know what had happened.

"I had a fall?" he said, questioningly. "Yes; I remember! But everything appears muddled. I have been dreaming or sick, have I not?"

It was all so strange; the dead come back to life, apparently, and speaking to them as Lazarus may have spoken to his friends when he came forth from the tomb bound about with grave-clothes! For an instant they could not find their tongues.

The silence was broken by Waxy Joe, who had been hovering anxiously in the background.

"Twa'n't no dream!" he cried. "You was dead, and then you went crazy, and now you're yourself ag'in!"

Then the youth gave vent to his bubbling joy by throwing a handspring right in the center of the room.

"Dead! Crazy!" demanded Nettleton. "What nonsense is this? What do you mean, Joe? And where is Edith?"

"Yes, sir! You was first dead, and then you went crazy!" and Joe commenced a running fire of explanation and comment. There were also questions and answers innumerable; and to shorten the story and make it more readable, I will throw it into narrative form.

It will be remembered that Joe disappeared on the evening of the funeral. He had no conversation with Edith after her return from the canyon, where he thought her dead; nor, so far as known, did he speak to any one. He hung about the stables, weeping and avoiding companionship.

He was present, however, at the funeral. For some cause he had conceived the idea that Mr. Nettleton was not really dead. Whether it was from some indefinable instinct denied to those

of higher intelligence, is a question that I leave to the consideration of psychologists. The fact remains, and I am only dealing with facts.

Pressed by this belief, he crowded his way to the coffin and looked into the face of the supposed dead ranch king. There was a sort of rosy tinge on the otherwise pallid cheeks—such a tinge as is sometimes seen on the cheeks of the dead—and that served to convince him that he was right in his conjecture.

But he said nothing. In this he was actuated by what were, to him, all-sufficient motives. He believed his statements would not be heeded, and he was further convinced that Mascot Bill and Ben Towsley were the ranch king's deadly enemies, and would prevent any efforts at restoration, should such be urged.

That night, as soon as it grew dark, he came alone to the grave, armed with a spade and carrying such articles as he thought might be useful.

This fact shows the innate courage and heroism of the youth, when his sympathies and energies were once aroused. He was ignorant, half-witted and superstitious. Yet he controlled his fears sufficiently to visit that grave and to deliberately set about the resurrection of its inmate.

He worked silently and swiftly, throwing out the earth with a sort of frantic energy.

He shuddered, he confessed, and came near abandoning his purpose, when the spade struck with a hollow sound on the box that inclosed the coffin. But he managed to repress or control his fears, and proceeded with his self-imposed task.

After uncovering and opening the box, he removed the coffin-lid, ignited a match, and looked into the face below him. The tinge had deepened and reddened. He was sure, then, that Nettleton was alive; and his fears fled.

He lifted him from the grave by almost superhuman efforts, and laid him on the grass. In doing so, he noticed that Nettleton's body was not at all stiff, as the bodies of the dead are. Neither did it have that icy coldness to the touch.

He wished to begin the work of resuscitation at once, but feared to, and hastily scooped the earth back into the grave. After which he carefully rounded and smoothed it, so that it would exhibit no sign of having been disturbed.

Then he half-dragged and half-carried the ranch king to the little cave hidden away in the arroya and there worked with and chafed him until the apparently dead man came back to life.

But though Nettleton came back to life he did not at first come back to consciousness. For several days he remained in a state of semistupor. Those were terrible days for Joe, for he feared he was about to lose the life that he had so wonderfully saved.

That first night, after Nettleton revived and showed signs of recovery, Waxy stole away to the ranch-house, purloined a bundle of Nettleton's clothing and a bountiful supply of provisions. He also brought water in jugs.

Dolly had noticed from time to time that articles were missing and had wondered about it, without until now knowing what had really become of them.

Waxy at intervals made a number of such nightly trips for provisions and water. He never left the cave in the daytime.

He had full confidence in the fact that Mascot Bill and Ben Towsley would in due time run their evil course at the ranch and be placed under arrest or dismissed. And it was impressed upon his mind as a duty that he must keep the ranch king concealed until that time.

He believed that those men would leave no stone unturned to compass Nettleton's death, if they knew he was alive. Therefore, in his judgment, the way to defeat their purpose was to keep the ranch king out of their sight.

He feared, in all this, to trust any one. He believed that Edith was in love with Mascot Bill, and that, in their confidences, the precious information would be communicated to the latter. For the same or similar reasons, he feared to confide in Tony or Dolly. Tony could keep nothing from Dolly, and Dolly could conceal nothing from her mistress. Hence the only safety lay in absolute and rigid silence until the time should come when concealment would be no longer necessary.

As has been said, the ranch king lay in a semistupor for several days. Then he recovered, as far as his bodily powers were concerned, but his mind was a perfect blank.

Waxy Jim watched over him as tenderly as if he were an infant, humored his whims, gratified his reasonable desires and endeavored to restrain him from leaving the arroya.

But on a number of occasions, when Joe had fallen asleep at night, worn out with watching, Nettleton stole forth and wandered like a specter about the ranch. It was at such times that occurred the "appearances," so mystifying and alarming to the beholders.

At the first outcry Nettleton would glide away, alarmed, and return to the cave, terror-stricken and shivering.

Joe had grown rather negligent as the weeks slipped by, and the appearances had conse-

quently increased. Two or three times recently he had awakened, to discover, with a start, that Nettleton was gone. But he had followed and brought him back—until this last time, when Tony's whirling rope solved the mystery.

Waxy had, for several days, been on the point of venturing forth and revealing his secret, urged by the prevailing quiet and the absence of Mascot and Towsley. But he had hesitated and hesitated, and so postponed the matter.

The next day, Jacob Nettleton, accompanied by every soul on the ranch, rode into Paradise Gulch. That meeting between father and daughter was of too solemn and sacred a nature to be marred by a feeble attempt at description.

It will be sufficient to say, that from the time of his restoration at the ranch-house he was in full and complete possession of his mental faculties. The old-time weakness of intellect had wholly departed.

It was a day of joy, and general reconciliation.

"Primrose!" exclaimed Nettleton, taking the latter by the hand, when the mutual explanations and congratulations had been gone over for the hundredth time. "You must forgive me. It was an almost unpardonable offense when I insulted and dismissed from my employment such a man as you. But forgive me. And if you want to be foreman again, name your wages and the place is open to you."

"It has been forgiven long ago, Mr. Nettleton," Primrose declared, earnestly. "You were not yourself that day. And I can take no position or reward for what I am doing. There are two men, though, who deserve well by you. I hope you will excuse me for naming them and saying so. They are Tony Bowers and Waxy Joe. And Jim Long and two or three of the cowboys have also been true and faithful."

"I have not forgotten them," the ranch king asserted. "It is something I can never do while I retain my faculties. I have thought of what I shall do for them. Trust me for that."

And he departed, calling for Tony and Joe, saying that he wanted to have a long talk with them.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE FALL OF ROCK.

THE talk led Tony to an avowal of his intention to marry Dolly; and Nettleton promised that he would aid in fitting out their proposed ranch. As for Joe he wanted nothing, and would accept nothing, save the privilege of remaining on the place which had so long been to him a pleasant home.

Primrose departed from the ranch king with a smiling face, but a heavy heart. The drama was nearing its end, and, as an actor in it, he would soon be compelled to leave the stage. His part had brought him much pleasure and a great deal of pain. The pleasure would become only a memory by and by, and the pain—he would try to forget it amid new scenes and excitements.

Thinking thus, he prepared to make his farewell visit to the Blue Bonnet Mine. He wished to see that everything was in working order and progressing satisfactorily.

Before departing he was visited again by Rafael, with an offer for the property. The events of the last few days had quite driven that gentleman from his mind.

He put him off, however, without a definite answer, and at once called on Edith, who was still at the boarding-house on that quiet, little side-street.

Edith was glowing with health, hope and pleasure, and Primrose thought he had never seen her so beautiful. But he had not come to utter compliments, and in a brief and business-like way, stated the nature of his errand.

"What would you advise me to do?" she asked when he had fully explained the offer.

"I don't like to advise at all, in so important a matter," he replied, coloring a little under her bright, girlish glances. "He will give you sixty thousand. That is a large sum, especially when the uncertain character of a mineral vein is taken into consideration. It might be exhausted to-morrow, and your mine would be valueless, or it might hold out indefinitely, and be worth millions. It's a difficult question you have asked me."

"What would you do, if it were yours?"

"That is almost as hard a question as the other," he replied, attempting a laugh. "I have never had one-tenth as large a sum at stake in all my life. Therefore, it's not an easy matter to put myself in your place."

"But you must say!" she insisted. "I rely entirely on your judgment."

"Well, I wouldn't sell. I'd risk getting that million!"

"So would I! Tell Mr. Rafael so!"

"Another thing!" he continued. "There's no further need of the mine standing in my name. Your guardian, Towsley, is dead; and your father is alive. When I return from the mine to-morrow I will make the property over to you or your father, as you may direct."

"And, now, while I think of it, I will give into your hands the will and notes which I took

from Towsley's body. I intended to do this sooner. Pardon the neglect!"

And he bowed himself out before she could control her surprise or thank him.

That afternoon he visited the mine. Work had been commenced on the roadway that was destined to lead up the canyon, and it was already so far advanced that carts could pass along it. But he followed the original route along the ledge.

A city of tents greeted him, as he drew near, and the hum of voices quite dispelled the old-time quiet and loneliness.

The shaft of the Blue Bonnet Mine had been driven into the face of the canyon wall at a descending angle, and was now far into the solid rock. The mouth looked like a yawning tunnel or wall, with hoisting machinery above it.

A little car led down into the black depths. By means of this he descended, accompanied by some of the respectful workmen, who looked upon him even now as a millionaire.

That evening he spent below the surface, and a great portion of the night, for there was a day and night shift of workmen.

Oppressed by sad thoughts he walked aside into a chamber that had been cut at right angles to the principal one. The ore had ceased, and the pocket-like chamber had been abandoned. Its quiet and gloom pleased him, and were in accordance with his troubled feelings.

How long he sat there, forgotten by foreman and workmen alike, he knew not. He had ceased to take note of time.

Then he was aroused in a terrible manner. He had noticed, without thinking what it meant, that the sounds of the drills and picks had stopped, but had paid no heed to it. Their cessation brought to him no warning. Then the very rocks quaked, a dull boom broke upon his ears, and he was covered and blinded by rock-dust and splinters.

A blast had been fired, and the falling rocks had shut him out from life and hope!

He did not realize at first how serious the affair was. The passage by which he had entered was filled and choked, but he did not doubt that the men could very readily release him.

He shouted to let them know where he was. His voice sounded dull and muffled. Again and again he called. No response came. Slowly the terrible truth was forced upon him. The blast had loosened the rock above the main chamber, and it had fallen in, like a down-pitching roof.

Then, with a despairing frenzy, he beat his fists against the rocks and exhausted himself, to sink down at last in hopeless apathy.

It was quickly discovered by the foreman that Primrose was missing.

Investigation showed that he had not returned to the surface before the firing of the blast.

A heavy force was accordingly put to work, in the hope that he might have escaped death. But it was easy to see that the foreman, in spite of his energetic manner, had little faith that Primrose would be rescued alive.

The news was speeding through Paradise Gulch, within two hours from the time of the fall.

Edith Nettleton heard it, with a shock, that came near depriving her of consciousness. Like a great wave, the knowledge that she really and truly loved this man rushed over her. For a time she was almost frantic.

Then summoning Tony and her father, she started with them for the scene of the accident at as quick speed as their nimble ponies were capable.

The men were working away in the shaft with a hopeless sort of energy when she reached the mine.

Without explaining by what authority she acted, or whether she had any authority, she virtually assumed control of the efforts at rescue. The foreman bowed to her wishes, as he would probably have bowed to the wishes of any pretty and imperious woman, and the workmen, under the inspiration of her words, toiled with renewed zeal.

But it was apparently a hopeless task, and she was forced to confess it, with anguish and tears.

The shifts were changed every four hours; the day wore away and the night came, to be succeeded by day. But incessantly, the work proceeded.

It was on the evening of the second day that the workmen reached a point opposite the chamber in which Primrose had been entombed. A faint moan came from it, and the news that he had been discovered and was still alive spread like wild-fire.

Edith pushed herself to the front and shouted encouraging words to him. The answers were a series of faint moans. These died away at last, and no response came to her calls.

And still the men, like toiling giants, worked! Just before morning the last stone was pried loose, and the way was open into the little chamber. Edith hurried in, followed by the workmen, with their lamps.

There, on the rocky floor, lay Primrose, pallid in face and apparently dead.

Two months later there was a grand wedding in the roomy parlor of the old ranch-house. How Edith managed to convey to Primrose the fact that his love was returned is something that Primrose himself cannot explain. He made the discovery, however, and the day on which he did so was, with one exception, the happiest of his existence. That exception was the day which saw him united to Edith Nettleton for life.

Tony Bowers could not brook so long a delay as two months. He was on his own ranch, with pretty Dolly Dimple for his wife, within a week after the ending of the trial that sent Mascot Bill into a long and well-deserved imprisonment.

The Blue Bonnet Mine continues to yield handsomely to this day. But, valuable as it is, Mr. and Mrs. Primrose scarcely prize it as they do the ranch where they passed the first months of their wedded life, and which they still visit with great pleasure.

The ranch king, apparently in the best of health, and good for many enjoyable and useful years, makes his home with them. As for Waxy Joe, the reader may be sure that he was never neglected or forgotten.

THE END.

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